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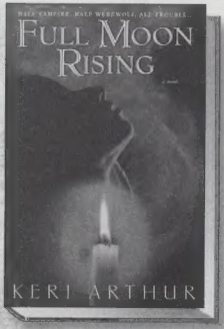

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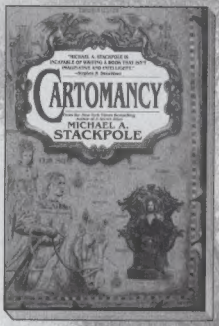

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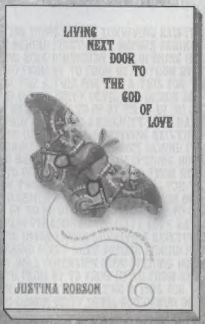

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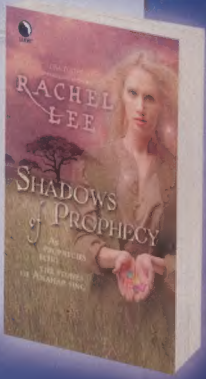

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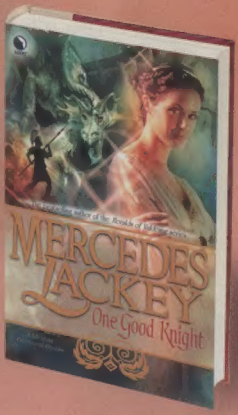

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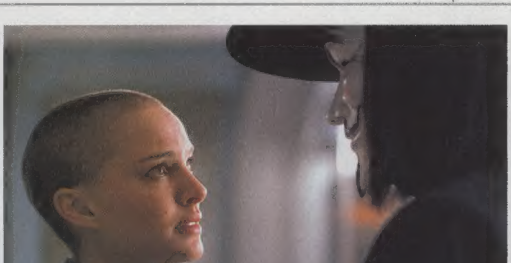
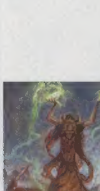
COVER: *The Hounds of Morrigan*, by Kinuko Craft. RIGHT: Natalie Portman and Hugo Weaving star in *V For Vendetta*. Story on page 20. BELOW: Detail of the cover art for the book, *Libris Mortis*, by Tom Kidd. Story on page 66.





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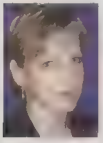
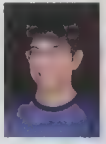
contributors

CRAIG ELLIOT (*right*) grew up in what is now Silicon Valley California. After attending Art Center College in Pasadena, Craig started working full time in the animation industry. He has worked primarily for Disney and Dreamworks, designing for animated films including *Hercules, Mulan, The Emperor's New Groove, Treasure Planet, Shark Tale,* and *Father of the Pride*. Craig has also done fully painted comic book and cover artwork for Dark Horse Comics, as well as illustration work for many different companies. His work can currently be seen in the books *Treasure Planet, a Voyage of Discovery* and *Spectrum 10 & 11*.



DEVON MONK (*left*) lives in Salem, Oregon, with her husband, two sons, and a colorful assortment of friends and family. Her fiction has appeared in such magazines as *Amazing Stories, Talebones, Black Gate,* and a variety of anthologies. **YUKO SHIMIZU** (*below left*) is an award winning Japanese illustrator who lives and works in New York City. When Yuko was small she started drawing, imitating great Sci Fi and fantasy artists such as Frank Frazetta and Jeffery Jones. She still keeps all of Frazetta's *Tarzan* books at her parents' house. She now works for such clients as Target, MTV, *Rolling Stone* ,and *The New Yorker*, but you can imagine how excited she was to do a piece for *Realms of Fantasy*.

KAREN HABER Karen Haber is the author of eight novels including *Star Trek: Voyager: Bless the Beasts*, co-author of *Science of the X-Men*, and editor of the Hugo-nominated essay collection celebrating J.R.R. Tolkien, *Meditations on Middle Earth*. With Jonathan Strahan she creates the popular *Year's Best SF* and *Year's Best Fantasy* series for ibooks. Her short fiction has appeared in *Asimov's* magazine, the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and many anthologies. She reviews art books for *LOCUS* magazine and profiles artists for various publications, including *Realms of Fantasy*. Her newest science fiction novel, *Crossing Infinity*, a YA tale of gender confusions between worlds, will be published by ibooks in November.



GREG VAN EEKHOUT (*right*) has had stones published in *Asimov's, Fantasy & Science Fiction,* and *Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*. His Web site is at www.sff.net/people/greg.

KAREN ABRAHAMSON is a criminal justice consultant, technical writer, and artist who lives in Langley, Canada. Her published short stories and poetry have appeared in publications such as *Strange Horizons, Paradox, A Room of One's Own,* and *ARC: Canada's National Poetry Magazine*. Karen is a perennial sojourner, who uses her travels as fuel for her writing. There's magic all around us—if we just choose to see.

DR. KRISTEN MCDERMOTT is an assistant professor of english literature at Central Michigan University, specializing in early modern english studies (particularly drama and theater history). She is editing *Masques of Difference: Power, Race, and Gender in the Masques of Ben Jonson* for Manchester University Press, and has published scholarly articles on Shakespeare and Ben Jonson. Her previous articles on the folklore of the theater for *Realms of Fantasy* magazine have been reprinted in the Endicott Studios online *Journal of Mythic Arts*.

SARAH PRINEAS has a PhD in english and teaches a course on fantasy and science fiction literature at the University of Iowa. She lives in Iowa City with her physicist husband and two small children. Her work has appeared in the Hugo-nominated online magazine *Strange Horizons* (www.strangehorizons.com).

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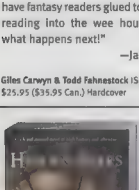

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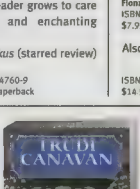

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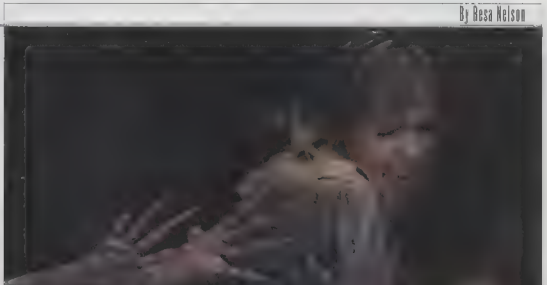
By Rosa Nelson



Rose (Radha Mitchell) is a mother desperately seeking her lost daughter in the town of Silent Hill

Silent Hill is poised take video game film adaptations to a new level.

Christophe Gans is a serious gamer

He plays video games at night, when he can turn out the lights, put on his headphones, shut out reality, and immerse himself wholly and completely into the world of the game Once immersed Gans is happiest when playing from dusk 'til dawn, entering that game's reality in the same way that readers sink into another world when they read a novel

But Gans isn't a teenage boy playing in his mother's basement He's a 45-year-old Frenchman who directs feature films for a living In the United States, he's best known for *The Brotherhood of the Wolf* (2001), a story of 18th century men in France on the trail of a creature that might be a werewolf, based on a true historical event

Gans's new movie, *Silent Hill* (scheduled for release on April 21 from TriStar Pictures), wasn't offered to him Gans literally stumbled onto his new project because he's a gamer

"I created the opportunity," Gans says "Six years ago I played the first game of *Silent Hill*, Edition 1 After two hours of diving into the game, I was blown away by the story. I called my producer and said, 'I just found an amazing game to adapt.' We were looking to do a horror film."

Because the video game is published by Konami in Japan, Gans's first step was to contact the gamemakers and ask their permission to adapt the game into a movie. It wasn't an easy task

For three years, Gans banged his head against the wall. He continuously attempted to contact the game company, but no one would talk to him. Because *The Brotherhood of the Wolf* was a huge success in Europe and Asia, Gans had plenty of strings, and he pulled all of them. Major names in the movie industry tried to contact the Japanese game company on Gans's behalf, but no one succeeded

Finally, Gans decided to take drastic action. He made a 40-minute film of himself in which he carefully explained why he was a fan of the *Silent Hill* video game and why he wanted so badly to adapt it Once his "interview" film was complete, Gans added Japanese subtitles With fingers crossed, he shipped the short film as his final plea to the game company They soon agreed to let him make the movie he wanted

Gans quickly points out that while adapting video games into movies is an important and growing trend, Hollywood doesn't get it

"The problem is that, for the moment, and I talk as a gamer," Gans says, "all of the adaptations have been really bad. They betray the original material—the game. The directors who made these adaptations don't understand the world of video games

"Most of the people think that video games are like B movies with guys shooting up monsters Some of the games are like that. They're just about hunting, about surviving But *Silent Hill* is based on atmosphere."

Gans notes that the game is so surrealistic at times that it's reminiscent of David Lynch movies. It also references other works such as *Jacob's Ladder* and Clive Barker's fiction

THE
HILLS
HAVE
EYES
The lucky ones
die first.
MARCH 2006

Because Gans is so enamored with the game, his adaptation is faithful. But how is it possible to faithfully adapt a video game into a film?

"It's not like adapting a book," Gans says. "When you're playing a game like *Silent Hill*, it's like visiting another country. I've been in Silent Hill. I know that place. I know how I was feeling when I was playing the game."

"And then you come back and say, 'I'm going to make a movie from all the memories that I have.' The movie is what happened to me when I was in Silent Hill."

"It is the story of a woman who is very worried because her little girl has a very strong sleepwalking crisis. That little girl is talking about Silent Hill, and she wants to go back. She was there when she was sleepwalking."

The sleepwalking gets to be so much of a problem that it endangers the little girl, Sharon (played by Jodelle Ferland of TV's *Wolf Lake*). Hospitalization looks like the only answer.

But before that can happen, her mother, Rose (played by Radha Mitchell of *Pitch Black*), makes a desperate decision to find Silent Hill, believing that it holds the answer to her daughter's problem. Without telling her husband Christopher (played by Sean Bean of *The Lord of the Rings*) where she is going, she takes Sharon in search of Silent Hill.

"She arrives at Silent Hill and loses her little girl," Gans says. "And in trying to find her little girl, she begins to realize that this place is in another dimension. In trying to find her little girl, she discovers the truth behind the town."

"The movie is about motherhood. I think the movie is very disturbing and shocking."

And that was the goal of the game's creators, three young Japanese men who look like they belong in a rock band, according to Gans. Although the game and movie may be shocking, there is one glaring difference from the run-of-the-mill video game: in Silent Hill it's almost impossible to kill anything.

And unlike the run-of-the-mill horror movie, danger lurks everywhere.

"Usually a horror film is based on confined space, like a room or a house," Gans says. "This movie happens in a complete town, and the town has four different stages."

In other words, Silent Hill isn't just a town in another dimension. It's a town that exists in four different dimensions that are all superimposed on each other. One Silent Hill is steeped in surrealism. Another is the normal town that Silent Hill used to be 30 years ago, before things went terribly wrong. There is another Silent Hill enveloped in fog, and yet another that is literally lost in the dark. Whether they want to or not, the residents of Silent Hill—who are all women—constantly jump from one version of the town to another.

Filming these overlapping realities was a head-spinning experience, especially for the actors. To help them understand exactly where they were on any given day of shooting, Gans created a very precise storyboard, which the actors used as a road map.

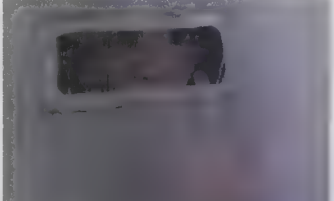
At one point Gans realized he was asking a great deal of Ferland. The story calls for her to play a different character in each version of the town. That's a lot to ask of any actor, but it's a demand that can weigh especially heavily on the shoulders of a child.

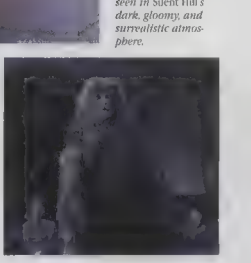
"I was most concerned about that aspect," Gans says. "But it turned out to be something great."

Both the gamemakers and the filmmakers were heavily influenced by modern art when designing the town. The movie required 100 sets and locations.

"Classical art is about beauty," Gans says. "Modern art is about the social violence of the last century." Gans cites nuclear weapons and concentration camps as examples of such violence.

The purpose of the *Silent Hill* video game is to learn the truth about what happened to the town 30 years ago and then find an exit from that world. The movie tells a story of faith and intolerance. It is also a very emotional story that raises large questions about humanity.





LEFT AND BELOW: Director Christophe Gans's mission with Silent Hill *was to stick closely to the overall tone and presentation of the source material. The results of Gans's efforts can clearly be seen in* Silent Hill*'s dark, gloomy, and surrealistic atmosphere.*

In many ways *Silent Hill* and *The Brotherhood of the Wolf* are at opposite ends of the spectrum, both directed by a man who knew he wanted to be a filmmaker by the age of 12.

"*The Brotherhood of the Wolf* was a fantasy for little boys," Gans says. "It's the movie I would have to loved to see as a child. It was like a big comic book set in the 18th century. *The Brotherhood of the Wolf* was an iconoclastic version of France, like a Saturday matinee serial made with the story of France."

Before Gans became a director, he was a journalist. These days he reflects on the future of video games and horror movies. "Gamers get bored with games that are only about slaughtering opponents. I like action games—good ones. *Silent Hill* is a very ambitious game. I love the fact that all the characters in the game were very emotional.

"Horror movies must move in this direction—must deal with real emotions—to survive. Movies like *Saw* are just movies about people hurting themselves."

Gans sees a trend in successful games having real content as opposed to being simplistic games based on killing monsters. He believes that it will become more common for authors to get involved in creating video games in the near future.

He also believes that the events of 9-11 have changed the world in such a way that horror movies must change in order to succeed.

"Horror films today must deal with the new concept of good and evil," Gans says. "*Silent Hill* tries to express a new concept of evil. We're living in a very different world. The line between good and evil has been completely fractured, and people must deal with that confusion."

A high fantasy TV miniseries, *Dark Kingdom: The Dragon King*, is slated to air on the SCI FI Channel in March. At first glance, it looks like a ripoff of *The Lord of the Rings*. But *Dark Kingdom* is actually based on a German saga (*The Nibelungs Saga*) from the Middle Ages—which happens to be the same saga that inspired J.R.R. Tolkien to write *The Lord of the Rings* and Wagner to write his Ring Cycle operas. *Dark Kingdom* is directed by Uli Edel, who also directed TV's *The Mists of Avalon*. *Dark Kingdom* has been his dream project ever since attending film school 18 years ago in Munich.

"The only thing that our story has in common with the Wagner opera is that we used some of the same material from the Volsung Saga," Edel says. "This story is about 1,500 years old. It was passed down verbally from generation to generation over hundreds of years until it was written down in the 13th

of Angerl, through no fault of his own. The Burgund King's advisor, Hagen (played by Julian Sands of *Warlock*), plots to steal Siegfried's gold, so he uses black magic to make Siegfried fall in love with Kriemhild and forget Brunhild.

Even worse, the rightful owners of the gold are the mystic Nibelungs. Their curse on the gold threatens to trap anyone who covets it, as the world teeters on the brink of chaos.

"Our script is actually based on several different versions of the sagas, the first one going back to the 5th century and the last one being the famous German *Nibelungen lied*, which was written by an anonymous author in the 13th century," says executive producer Rola Bauer. "It is a very epic story that could have gone in many directions. We had to break the story down into a manageable size, which would be accessible to a modern-day audience. Everyone who read the treatment – and the later various incarnations of the script – became very passionate about the project and we were able to get more and more people involved financially and creatively."

LEFT: Dark Kingdom. The Dragon King *starts (left to right) Alicia Witt, Benno Furmann, and Kristanna Loken. BELOW:* Brunhild *challenges Siegfried*

century. In the past hundred years, it has been retold in various ways and in many different versions, but my story focuses on the relationship between Siegfried, the dragon-slayer; his tragic love for Brunnhild, the powerful Queen of Iceland; and the lovesick princess of Burgund, Kriemhild."

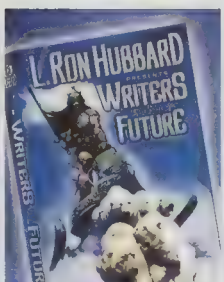
Set in Germany around the year 500, evil Twin Kings betray Siegfried's father, the King of Xanten. The king's young son escapes and is rescued by a blacksmith who raises Siegfried (played by German actor Benno Furmann of HBO's *My House in Umbria*) as his own. The gods send a sign in the form of a meteor, which leads Siegfried to a special metal. He forges a sword from that metal, which he uses to slay the dragon Fafnir. Siegfried then claims the gold being guarded by the dragon as his own.

But the meteor also led Siegfried to the woman chosen by the gods to be his true love: Brunhild (played by Kristanna Loken of *Terminator 3*), the Valkyrie warrior queen of Iceland. But they eventually separate thanks to the call of duty, and Siegfried falls in love with the Burgund princess, Kriemhild (played by Alicia Witt of *Vanilla Sky* and *The Upside*

While some sequences were filmed against blue screen (such as Siegfried fighting a CGI dragon), several sets depicting the early Middle Ages were created in South Africa, just outside Cape Town. In addition to Siegfried's confrontation with Fafnir, the miniseries includes large battle scenes and sword fights.

"It's an epic period film about one man's journey of self-discovery through more than twenty action sequences," says stunt coordinator Grant Hulley.

Sword fight coordinator Mo Marais adds: "Fighting in this era was mainly hand-to-hand combat with swords, shield, spear, and axe weaponry. Given the period, we made the fighting barbaric and rough, and the battles hard core, but we also added some martial artistic flair for our key actors to differentiate them from the common man."



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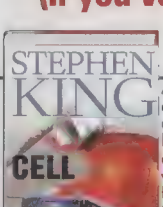

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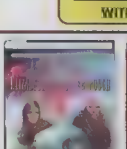
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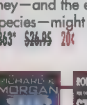

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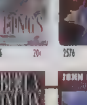

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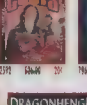

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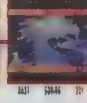
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SCIENCE FICTION BOOK CLUB

Cheating Death: Final Destination 3 (scheduled for release on February 10 from New Line Cinema) is the latest installment of a series of films directed by James Wong (TV's *The X-Files*). In the first movie, a group of friends was kicked off a plane when one of them panicked after having a vision of it crashing. Sure enough, as they watch from the airport terminal, the plane crashes soon after takeoff. But then, one by one, each friend who should have died on that plane meets a bizarre death. The premise is that each of us comes with an expiration date, and if you somehow manage to escape your fate, Death will come looking for you. The second movie focused on a group of people who should have died as the result of an event in the first movie—again, they bite the bullet one by one.

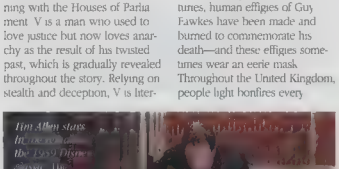
Set six years after the first movie, *Final Destination 3* is about a high school girl who has a premonition that she and her friends will die in a roller-coaster accident. Sure enough, they cheat death by not going on the rollercoaster, but now Death is hot on their heels.

The Shaggy Dog (scheduled for release from Buena Vista Pictures on March 10) is a remake of a popular 1959 Disney film. Tim Allen stars as a family man who is changed by a magical spell. Every so often, whether he wants to or not, he transforms into a sheep dog. Kristin Davies, Danny Glover, Robert Downey, Jr., and Craig Kilborn also star in this slapstick comedy.

V For Vendetta (scheduled for release on March 17 from Warner Brothers Pictures) is an adaptation of the graphic novel by Alan Moore and David Lloyd. Natalie Portman (*Closer, Cold Mountain*) stars as Evey Hammond, an average teenager who lives in an alternate history. Decades after Hitler wins World War II, England is now a Fascist state.

The graphic novel begins when Evey reaches the end of her rope and decides the only way she can survive is to offer herself as a prostitute on the streets of London. She soon finds herself in a dangerous situation, but she's rescued by a stranger wearing a cloak, a tall and wide brimmed black hat, and the peculiar mask of a pale man with a frozen smile. She learns he only goes by a code name, V (played by Hugo Weaving of *The Matrix* movies) and he never removes his mask.

V takes Evey under his wing, but he isn't a superhero or a vigilante. He's a terrorist who bombs buildings that house London's government, beginning with the Houses of Parliament. V is a man who used to love justice but now loves anarchy as the result of his twisted past, which is gradually revealed throughout the story. Relying on stealth and deception, V is literally a man of cloak and daggers in a world of guns. As the truth about V unfolds, Evey must decide who she is and what she will do about the man who is sheltering her while being hunted by the government.



Moore has reported that it was Lloyd who came up with the idea of modeling V after a notorious criminal from 17th-century London, Guy Fawkes. He was born a Protestant but converted to Catholicism as a teenager during a time of intolerance toward Catholics in England. In his twenties, Fawkes enlisted in the Spanish Army and worked with explosives as a gunpowder packer. In 1604, Fawkes joined forces with a small group of men who planned to destroy the Houses of Parliament by blowing them up. As an explosives expert, Fawkes was the one who hid 36 barrels of gunpowder in the cellar beneath the Houses of Parliament and waited there to fire the gunpowder as soon as Parliament opened. However, the others in his group were concerned about hurting the few Catholics in Parliament, so they sent a letter of warning to King James I. It wasn't long before officials discovered Fawkes in the cellar. He was tortured until he confessed, and he and his colleagues were declared guilty and executed. It is said that bonfires were lit all over London on the day that Fawkes was hung, drawn, and quartered. For centuries, human effigies of Guy Fawkes have been made and burned to commemorate his death—and these effigies sometimes wear an eerie mask. Throughout the United Kingdom, people light bonfires every November 5th to mark Fawkes's failure to topple the government.

The last scene shot by director James McTeigue during production was a recreation of Fawkes's execution. The question is, will McTeigue stay true to the vision of Moore and Lloyd? Or will this be another intelligent graphic novel that's mashed into Hollywood pulp? ❧

Knights Edge
Stage Steel

By Kristen McDermott

Fairies and the English-speaking dramatic theater have long been intertwined.

Many children of the 1960s have vivid memories of applauding the black-and-white TV screen as the diminutive musical comedy actress Mary Martin, playing Peter Pan, begged the unseen audience to "clap for Tink." However, as I watched the recent film *Neverland*, a dramatization of the events that led to author J.M. Barrie's composition of this play, I realized that the excitement created by clapping for the TV screen was nothing compared to what it must have been for children in a darkened London theater in 1904, as a "real live" Peter Pan begged them from the lip of the stage to clap, and they felt that their own small hands were reviving the animated spotlight that represented Tinker Bell.

Folklorist Katherine Briggs notes, "English fairy beliefs ... from Chaucer's time onwards have been supposed to belong to the last generation and to be lost to the present one." For this reason, the presence of a fairy onstage automatically draws us into a sense of timelessness, a sense of being cut off from the ties of reality and the familiar. In creating Tinkerbell for *Peter Pan*, Barrie drew on an existing tradition of fairies onstage that stretches back to Shakespeare in English drama, with even deeper roots than that. In fact, the presence of fairies in drama can be said to go back to the very beginnings of drama as ritual.

If, as anthropologists believe, drama had its beginnings in religious invocations, there is certainly no mystery in the fact that the professional English theater in its first era so frequently dealt with the miraculous unseen world. The professional theater as we know it in the English-speaking tradition had as its beginnings in the annual "mystery play" cycles performed every summer at the feast of Corpus Christi. This

One of the greatest of fairy scenes is Arthur Rackham's The Meeting of Oberon and Titania.

This thing was huge. Epic, even. You're sorry you missed it. For you, the news is good. Mythic Journeys is scheduled to return in 2006.
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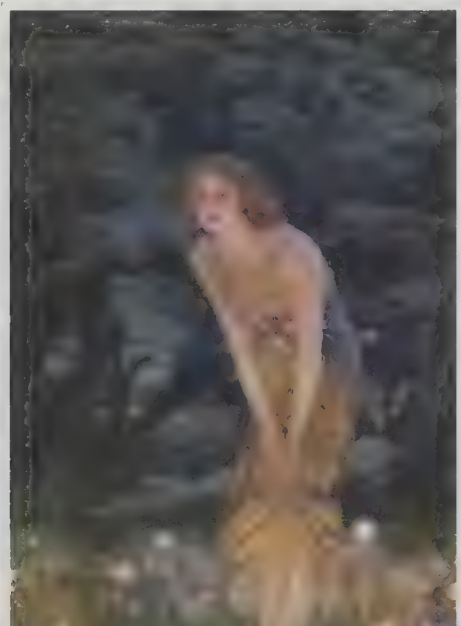

Midsummer Eve, *by Edward Robert Hughes*

church celebration of the central mystery of Christianity—the incarnation of Christ—presented the entire Bible, from Genesis to Apocalypse, over three action packed days. Each segment of the drama, produced by a different village or trade guild, depicted some marvelous biblical event, with all the imaginative special effects the medieval mind could devise.

By Shakespeare's time, the mystery plays had been banished by the Protestant church that was now the official faith of England. The English people, starved for a sense of miraculous spectacle denied them when the Catholic Church was outlawed, turned to the stage to feed their sense of wonder. Briggs suggests that the explosion of fairy references in the plays of the turn of the 17th century reflected the giddy relief felt by the English people after the death of Elizabeth I; their fears that religious intolerance and war would follow the death of the childless queen were allayed by the peaceful accession of the Protestant James I who, at least in the first years of his reign, promised both tolerance and prosperity to his new nation. It was probably not insignificant, either, that James was a Scot, a Celt, a fervent believer in witchcraft and a writer of poetic romances in his youth.

It is not surprising, then, that playwrights like William Shakespeare, seeking to please both the courtiers educated in romance and classical myth and the recently rural London citizens, made use of a full complement of ghosts, witches, and fairies, integrating them into the adventures of the human beings depicted on stage. The most memorable of these characters are the fairies of *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*, particularly Puck, the mischievous hobgoblin who attends Oberon, King of Faerie and who embodies the transitional state of folk beliefs about the world of Faerie in the early modern period—a time of increased urbanization and industrialization in Europe, and particularly England.

Traditional criticism regards the world of Faerie in *Midsummer* as an elaborate metaphor for poetic art and the power of the imagination, and that is certainly true. However, Shakespeare never made purely metaphoric use of folkloric material. He knew that many people in his audience were recently arrived from the countryside and, as I have discussed in an earlier Folkroots column, "Shakespeare and the English Holiday Calendar" (August 2003), he made a specific effort to connect his dramatic worlds to the everyday spiritual life of his audience through references to folk belief.

Fairies were particularly powerful elements in the daily lives of rural people, even—or perhaps especially—in respectable, businesslike, Protestant 16th-century England. Times and ways were changing rapidly, especially for the upwardly mobile classes of artisans and workers who moved from the countryside to the city to make their fortunes. Richly imaginative, often secretly Catholic at heart, and frequently superstitious, the working folk of London clung to their belief in an unseen world lurking just outside their field of vision. Ghosts, witches, sorcerers, and demonic possession they believed to be not only possible but quite common. The movements of the planets, the appearances of wonders like comets, earthquakes, or "prodigious births" were all signs to be interpreted, that a kingdom of fairies might live just outside the walls of a great city was not purely a fantastic notion to many of them.

So Robin Goodfellow, Puck, the merry heart of Shakespeare's tale of lovers parted and reunited, is a particularly apt and powerful figure. His talent is for shape-shifting, he is a faerie who delights in living on the borderland between the human and faerie worlds:

> *I am that merry wanderer of the night*
> *I jest to Oberon and make him smile*
> *When I a fat and bean-fed horse beguile,*
> *Neighing in likeness of a filly foal*
> *And sometime lurk I in a gossip's bowl*
> *In very likeness of a roasted crab*
> *And when she drinks, against her lips I bob*
> *And on her wither'd dewlap pour the ale*
> *The wisest aunt, telling the saddest tale,*
> *Sometime for three-foot stool mistaketh me,*
> *Then slip I from her bum, down topples she* (2.1)

Similarly, the structure of *Midsummer* is based on the notion of mirror-worlds eternally separate yet eternally dependent on one another

A Midsummer Night's Dream tells the story of two kingdoms and two monarchs. Theseus of ancient Athens and Oberon of Faerie. They rule cheek-by-jowl, one in the city and one in the forest wilderness, connected not only geographically, but by their love for Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons, a race of female warriors. As the play begins, Theseus is about to wed Hippolyta, having defeated her in battle and Oberon is in the midst of a serious rift with his wife, Titania, the Queen of Faerie. So the human couple, who began in strife, have moved into amity, and the Faerie couple, having begun in love, have moved into deadly hate

The bone of contention between Oberon and Titania is "a little changeling boy." Fairy changelings were particularly beautiful human children stolen by fairies, who then left a fairy infant in their place. The substituted child, often a defective specimen to begin with and unused to human food and nurture, would slowly sicken and die. This belief may well have served to explain the tragic real-life cases of children who failed to thrive, providing some measure of comfort to grieving parents

Titania's changeling boy, however, was not stolen but was willed to the Faerie Queen by a beloved human

His mother was a votaress of my order
And, in the spiced Indian air, by night,
Full often hath she gossip'd by my side
But she, being mortal, of that boy did die.
And for her sake do I rear up her boy
And for her sake I will not part with him
(2.1)

Oberon has asked Titania to give him the boy for his own entourage, either because he has no son of his own, or perhaps purely out of vanity. Titania denies him, but we are not sure why; perhaps she truly loves the boy, or perhaps she is tired of Oberon's high-handed ways, or perhaps she is repaying him for some infidelity. There is no source for this section of the play (and Shakespeare rarely created his tales from whole cloth), so we can presume Shakespeare had some particular point to make here about the relationships between the human and unseen worlds by complicating the relationship between Titania and Oberon

Oberon and Titania are characters with multiple origins. Shakespeare draws from Plutarch's *Lives* for their history and their connections to Theseus and Hippolyta, but from the medieval romance *Huon of Bordeaux* for Oberon's character. Titania's infatuation with Bottom has a comic Roman source in Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*, but liaisons between humans and fairies are as old as fairy lore itself. Puck himself has a similarly long and complex pedigree. Although most directly a form of the shape-shifting *pùca* (a malicious Celtic fairy that took the form of various animals, most commonly a horse, to carry a hapless night wanderer on a terrifying journey), Puck is also related to the homely hob or hearth-spirit, in turn descended from the Greek fertility godlings who became the Roman household gods, the *lares* and *penates*

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Fiction

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"Snakespeare's Folklore" by Kristen McDermott, http://www.endicott-studio.com/rdrm/rdrmfe.html

"J.M. Barrie and Peter Pan" by Terri Windling, http://www.endicott-studio.com/rdrm/rdrmPeterPan1.html.

So Shakespeare's fairies are a motley collection, sharing qualities with the alluring *Daoine Sidhe* of Irish tradition, the Shining Ones who live under the hills, as well as the carefree nature spirits—the water, flower, and earth spirits of classical mythology—and the humanlike semi-divine heroes of medieval romance Their activities are similarly varied ranging from garden-variety mischief to near apocalyptic disaster

Puck s pranks center around the home and hearth, country roads and marshes, food and barnyard animals Oberon and Titania s influence is much greater. Their discord has caused the seasons to alter and the land to become barren, subject to flood, drought, and pestilence For Puck to meddle in the love affairs and petty fantasies of humankind is to be expected, and as such is a comfortingly familiar theme for Shakespeare's working class audience- for Titania and Oberon to descend to such things is a piece of comic absurdity that Shakespeare's more educated viewers would have appreciated Shakespeare's plays revel in the almost frantic sense of variety and change made possible by his new art form—the magical "Wooden O" that could be so many different places at once. peopled by that new breed of artist, the professional actor, who could be anyone or anything at a moment's notice These actors, this theater, had never before existed on English soil until the 16th century. small wonder Shakespeare chose to present tales that were rooted in the oldest beliefs and oral traditions The allure of the familiar in such a novel setting was irresistible to an artist of Shakespeare's caliber

The worlds of Faerie and humankind were characterized in Celtic and even earlier myth as fatally separate from one another, yet interdependent The legendary descendents of the *Sidhe* once lived in amity with humans, but that union had been breached long ago, and the split had been made permanent by the meddling of the Church As Chaucer's Wife of Bath explains

For now the so-great charity and prayers
Of limiters and other holy friars
That do infest each land and every stream
As thick as motes are in a bright sunbeam
Blessing halls, chambers, kitchens, ladies bowers
Cities and towns and castles and high towers
Manors and barns and stables, aye and dairies—
This causes it that there are now no fairies
For where was wont to walk full many an elf
Right there walks now the limiter himself
In noons and afternoons and in mornings
Saying his matins and such holy things.
As he goes round his district in his gown

Post-Christian-era humans feared the Faerie realm. while fairies tormented and exploited any human foolish enough to meddle with them or their sacred places

Shakespeare dramatizes such an encounter, but with a light comedic touch. Two sets of humans encounter and are transformed by the fairies an unevenly matched set of two pairs of lovers, and a group of rural artisans with delusions of theatrical grandeur Hermia and Lysander are eloping to avoid the marriage her father has arranged; Hermia's childhood friend Helena has followed Hermia's rejected suitor Demetrius whom she dotes on one sidedly Touched by Helena's misery, Oberon instructs Puck to anoint Demetrius's eyes with a herb that will make him love the next thing he sees (presumably Helena) Madcap Puck mistakenly anoints both Lysander and Demetrius, so that they both pursue Helena, leaving Hermia alone to grieve. Much confusion ensues before the lovers are sorted into their appropriate pairs

Meanwhile, the amateur actors, led by loudmouthed Bottom the Weaver, are rehearsing "most obscenely" in the woods For the sheer fun of it, Puck transforms Bottom s head into an ass s head, and, at Oberon's instruction anoints Titania s sleeping eyes with the love-herb as well She wakes to see the ungainly Bottom and immediately draws him into her fairy bower for a night of passion

An interesting thing happens when Bottom is introduced to Titania She is surrounded by fairy attendants, all of whom she orders to wait on Bottom The ones who speak to Bottom are named Pease Blossom, Mustard Seed, Moth, and Cobweb. Titania's orders bring attention to the fact that these nature spirits are tiny in size

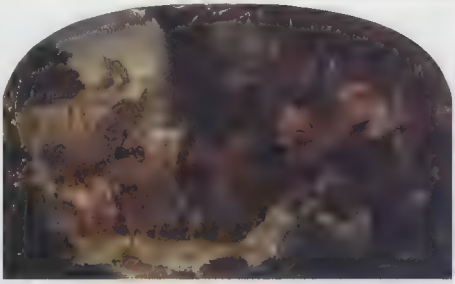
Explore The Fantasy

The honey-bags steal from the humble bees
And for night-tapers crop their waxen thighs
And light them at the fiery glow-worm's eyes
To have my love to bed and to arise
And pluck the wings from painted butterflies
To fan the moonbeams from his sleeping eyes
Nod to him elves and do him courtesies

Yet Bottom is held in an inescapable embrace by Titania, always presented as a full-grown woman

Sleep thou, and I will wind thee in my arms.
Fairies be gone, and be always away.
So doth the woodbine the sweet honey-suckle
Gently entwist; the female ivy so
Enrings the barky fingers of the elm

Titania promises Bottom, "I will purge thy mortal grossness so/That thou shalt like an airy spirit go." The fairies of *Midsummer*, like the *Sidhe*, are therefore multiple in form—tiny and large, corporeal and incorporeal—and the vivid imagery of the scene is designed to help the audience to make the imaginative leap from the sight of a group of English boy actors to the vision of a fairy queen and her train.



The Fairy Raid, *by Sir Joseph Noël Paton*

Shakespeare's audience would have heard countless tales of mortals who wandered into the midst of the fairy revels and were met with an unimaginable, impossibly rich and alluring scene of tempting foods, ravishing music, and beautiful beings all seemingly delighted to see the human in their midst. They would also know that almost all such tales ended when the mortals ate or drank the delicacies offered to them by the fairies or accepted the erotic gifts of a fairy man or woman. Sometimes such acts brought the fairy vision to an abrupt end, sometimes they entrapped the mortal within the fairy realm forever, or at least for a long while. Bottom experiences a version of both fates. Titania holds him for a while by gentle force—"Out of this wood do not desire to go /Thou shalt remain here whether thou wilt or no."—but he also wakes suddenly to find himself restored to his own place and person although forever altered by his experience.

After all the adventures are sorted out and Bottom and his friends are given their moment in the spotlight, the fairies return to bestow a final blessing on the multiple bridal beds. This is no mere formality, although it is a generous condescension by the reunited Titania and Oberon. The Faerie King promises that their blessing will ensure that the fruits of the wedding nights will "ever more be fortunate."

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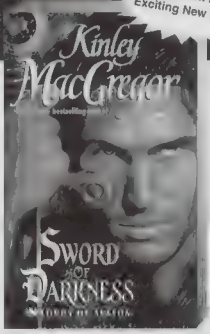

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Oberon and Titania—The Quarrel, *by Sir Joseph Noël Paton*

And the blots of Nature's hand
Shall not in their issue stand,
Never mole, hare lip, nor scar,
Nor mark prodigious, such as are
Despised in nativity
Shall upon their children be

They have the power to confer the luck of the Shining Ones upon mortal children. It is not a gift to be given lightly. Only a sense of *noblesse oblige* for so wantonly meddling in human behavior—never remorse, of course: fairies have no altruism—could make the King and Queen of Faerie give so greatly of themselves.

Puck has a final promise, however. He addresses the audience directly—"give us your hands, if we be friends"—pleading for applause in the same way Peter Pan does for Tinker Bell. Puck assures the audience,

If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended,
That you have but slumber'd here
While these visions did appear
And this weak and idle theme,
No more yielding but a dream.

Was it all a dream? Is a play real, or not, or does it occupy some shadowland between the two realms, the real and the fantastic?

Puck is our guide and threshold-guardian. Child of the human hearth as well as the fairy ring, he alone can conduct us into and out of the realm of Faerie. Contradictory and inconsistent, his adventures, already detailed in numerous ballads and pamphlets by Shakespeare's time, ranged from stealing horses to humiliating magistrates to uniting separated lovers. Unsurprisingly, he is one of Shakespeare's best known and best loved creations, and other playwrights of the period inserted "Robin Goodfellow" into their works. Shakespeare's friend and rival Ben Jonson featured Robin in his court masque, *Love Restored*, as a stand-up comic who offered a long monologue about tricks he had played on greedy citizens. He makes a substantial appearance in a 1603 entertainment Jonson wrote to welcome the new Queen of England, Anna of Denmark, and her son, Prince Henry. In *The Entertainment at Althorp*, a "satyr" named Pug disrupts the fairy solemnities designed to welcome Anna and Henry, and eventually takes over the task himself. He also introduces another Queen of the Fairies, Queen Mab,

the mistress fairy,
That doth nightly rob the dairy,
And can hurt or help the churning
As she please, without discerning,
She that pinches country wenches
If they rub not clean their benches
This is she that empties cradles,
Takes out children, puts in ladles,
She can start our franklin's daughters
In their sleep with shrieks and laughters,
And on sweet Saint Anna's night
Feed them with a promised sight,
Some of husbands, some of lovers,
Which an empty dream discovers

Mab seems here to be a female version of Puck, at least in her ability to conduct humans into and out of the dream world, and to torment the lazy or stupid in inventive ways. She also "takes out children" or steals human babies and leaves changelings in their place—in this case, a dressed-up ladle.

Shakespeare's readers had heard of Queen Mab before. Mercutio, Romeo's beloved friend, offers a virtuosic description of the fairy queen responsible for human dreams:

She is the fairies' midwife, and she comes
In shape no bigger than an agate-stone
Her chariot is an empty hazel-nut
Made by the joiner squirrel or old grub,
Time out o' mind the fairies' coachmakers
And in this state she gallops night by night
Through lovers brains, and then they dream of love,
This is that very Mab
That plaits the manes of horses in the night,
And bakes the elflocks in foul sluttish hairs,
Which once untangled, much misfortune bodes
This is the hag, when maids lie on their backs,
That presses them and learns them first to bear,
Making them women of good carriage (1.4)

The dreams Mab brings are reflections of the deepest human desires, as Mercutio knows. And his fears about the power of

desire are, of course, borne out, as first he and then his beloved Romeo die as a result of young passion thwarted. In Shakespeare's tragic world, dreams are not mere shadows but rather "children of an idle brain./Begot of nothing but vain fantasy" that nevertheless have the power to foretell and to warn. Romeo comments, after hearing his friend become carried away with his vision of Mab,

my mind misgives
Some consequence yet hanging in the stars
Shall bitterly begin his fearful date
With this night's revels and expire the term
Of a despised life closed in my breast
By some vile forfeit of untimely death
He is, of course, tragically right

Ben Jonson, a city-raised boy, was far less reverent than Shakespeare about fairies. When he included the Queen of Faerie in *The Alchemist*, she was merely the disguise donned by a female con artist to bilk a law clerk (with too much book-learning and too little wit) of his inheritance. Convinced by the swindlers Subtle and Face that he is actually a changeling and the Faerie Queen's nephew, poor Dapper agrees to hand over all his metal, particularly his coins, and blindfold himself with what he is assured is the bit of the Faerie Queen's petticoat with which he was swaddled as an infant. When another "client" interrupts, Dapper is convinced to wait by the offer of fairy delicacies.

She, now, is set
At dinner, in her bed, and she has sent you,
From her own private trencher, a dead mouse,
And a piece of gingerbread, to be merry withal

Jonson well knew the forms of traditional fairyland encounters and plays with them here. He might also be mocking those who receive their fairy lore imperfectly, from books rather than from the traditional source—the mother's or nurse's knee. In each case, though, Jonson seems to see his fairy characters as controlling and correcting the greed and materialism of urban humans, rather than fulfilling—however indirectly—their dreams and fantasies.

Another fairy character appears in Jonson's 1615 play, *The Devil Is an Ass*, a satire of urban mores and manners. The minor devil Pug approaches his master, Satan, with a grandiose scheme to capture a human soul and graduate from mere nuisance to true devil. We know Pug is Puck because when he first begs Satan for the chance to win a human soul, Satan assumes that all he can accomplish is

the laming a poor cow, or two?
Entering a cow, to make her cast her farrow?
Or crossing of a market-woman's mare.

'Twixt this and Tot'nam? These were wont to be
Your main achievements, Pug. You have some plot now,
Upon a turning of ale, to stale the yeast,

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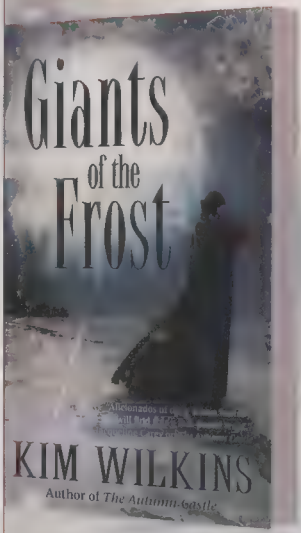

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Or keep the churn so, that the butter come not
'Spite o' the housewife's cord, or her bot spit?
Foolish Fiend
Stay i' your place, know your own strength
You would make I think
An agent to be sent for Lancashire
Proper enough, or some parts of Northumberland
So you had good instructions, Pug

Satan judges that the rural fairy is not meant for serious sin, and that his place is the countryside. He is correct. Pug spends the entire play struggling to corrupt a vain, ambitious fool named Fitzdotterel who, like Faustus, believes he has conjured Pug up from Hell. However, Fitzdotterel's folly and the vice of his friends is so great that the humans consistently get *Pug* into trouble. It is quite common in later literature, influenced by Puritan movements, to see fairy characters translated into devils, and Jonson may well be satirizing his old friend and rival's magical play, but Pug shares with Shakespeare's Puck and with Queen Mab the ability to remind humans that what we tend to dismiss as "fantasy" is actually the deepest truth about us—the secret desire no one else can see.

After Jonson, we see few fairies onstage. The rise of the Puritans banished such "demonic" figures from public view; the drama of the ensuing "enlightened" 18th century was more concerned with tales of classical heroism and contemporary social satire. The Romantic poets were fascinated with the unseen world and the ancient English traditions, but they scorned the theater as an impure art form, preferring to write "closet dramas" that were not performed. In the later 19th century, the novelists Bram Stoker and Wilkie Collins, both connected to the theater as well, delighted in tales of eerie monsters, ghosts, and vampires, but not in exploring the fairy as an expression of the human imagination. However, their popularization of the literature of the fantastic paved the way for the dazzling pantomimes of the Victorian period and for a new fashion in fairy plays.

The reawakening of interest in fairies during the Victorian age has been studied at length by a number of scholars, most recently Diane Purkiss in *At the Bottom of the Garden: A Dark History of Fairies, Hobgoblins, and Other Troublesome Things*. She and many scholars link the Victorian preoccupation with spiritualism and the supernatural to a variety of factors, including the beginnings of a Freudian interpretation of the subconscious, anxiety about industrialization and rapidly changing technologies, or economic tensions; she also suggests that the eroticization and exploitation of the image of the child is behind the fairy-fascination of the era. The explanation for why fairies became so much more popular *on stage* is rather simpler: electric lighting.

The great era of Victorian stage pantomime was made possible by advances in stage technology and a need to compete with the new entertainment media of photography and moving pictures. The explosion of fairy tale extravaganzas—which frequently included elaborate productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—were the inspiration for William Schwenk Gilbert's *Iolanthe; or, the Peer and the Peri*, the first "fairy tale opera." Gilbert and Sullivan were, by 1882, superstars of the Victorian English stage. Lyricist Gilbert, the son of an author of magical tales for children, made it his particular project to celebrate all the most beloved English folk traditions, from pirates to poets to *peris* (the Persian word for fairy). His tale is a satire and only nominally magical—it concerns a fairy woman and her half-human son, who loves a mortal shepherdess and longs for a career in Parliament. Victorian audiences enjoyed such absurdity, but the operetta was successful chiefly because it was performed in the first theater in the world to be wired for electricity. The fairies' hair, wings, and wands actually sparkled! The magic of the spectacle made up for the worldliness of the story.

Barrie, who was certainly familiar with both the pantomime tradition and Gilbert and Sullivan, brought them together in his most beloved play, *Peter Pan*. The son of working-class Scottish parents, he grew up on tales of adventure, pirates and fairies among his

favorites. His biographers believe the accidental death of his brother, David, when Barrie was seven traumatized him into preferring a perpetual state of childhood, preferring the perspective of children to that of adults.

Peter Pan, the boy who never grew up, may have been born of Barrie's own grief, but he is also the heir to the aspect of Faerie that most attracts humankind: the erasure of boundaries between the present moment of reality and the timeless expenence of magic and myth.

All children, except one, grow up. They soon know that they will grow up . . . You always know after you are two. Two is the beginning of the end.

Why can't you fly now, mother?

Because I am grown up, dearest. When people grow up they forget the way.

Why do they forget the way?

Because they are no longer gay and innocent and heartless. It is only the gay and innocent and heartless who can fly.

Of course, Pan is not the same as Puck, except in the sense that he bridges the seen and unseen worlds, our land and Neverland. Tinker Bell is the true Puck figure—indeed, the only real fairy—in the tale, rendered bodiless and protean as a spot of light onstage. Tink, like Puck, is amoral, meddling, and jealous, her only loyalty is to Peter Pan, and her willingness to sacrifice herself for him is a sentimental Victorian variation on tradition.

Pan and Puck have similar theatrical identities, however. Both are usually played by boys or women, making it easier to rig flying harnesses. However, two recent film interpretations—Steven Spielberg's *Hook* (1991), in which Robin Williams plays a grown-up Peter who rediscovers his inner Pan, and Michael Hoffman's lush *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1999), with a scruffy Stanley Tucci as Puck—have offered middle-aged males in these roles precisely to upend our image of these figures as delicate, harmless, and childlike.

In spite of these postmodern re-imaginings, chances are excellent that children will continue to be delighted at the sight of a lithe, sprightly Pan or Puck flying above a glittering stage, many times over in the coming years. That these versions of the shape-shifting fairy trickster have come to life most memorably onstage reminds us that, of all art forms, drama depends the most on our being able to occupy two worlds at once—the world of reality and the world of dreams. Puck/Pan/Pug, all exist to show humankind The Way—the thin veil between their world and what the Irish called *Tir-na-Nog*, the unseen world of the heart's desire, the land of youth, the land of dreams. ❧

Charles Vess's work, *Fairy Market* and *The Night Time Fair*, in the February 2006 issue, should have run with the following credit.
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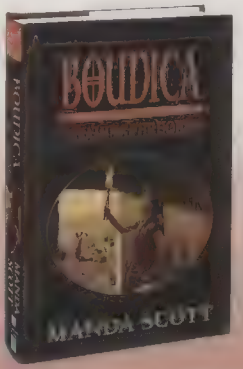

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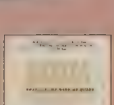

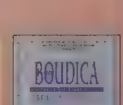

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By Gahan Wilson & Paul Witcover

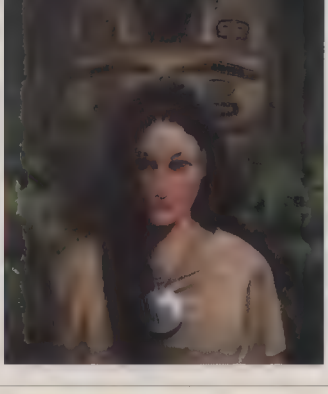
In his latest offering, Neil Gaiman opts to stick with a proven formula for success.

Neil Gaiman has been a consistent high flyer throughout his career starting by soaring far above most every other writer in the graphic novel world with his Sandman series. He continues to mount skyward with seeming effortlessness far above the vast bulk of authors presently toiling in the fantasy fiction field, although toiling is perhaps the wrong word since most of them seem to be having a pretty good time

Recently he swooped noticeably higher into the upper stratosphere by writing the hilarious and deeply touching and enormously successful novel *American Gods* which very convincingly depicted what might have happened if the great wave of impoverished European immigrants who fled to our shores had innocently and inadvertently lured along their ancient and powerful pagan gods so that they joined them in steerage during their rugged journey, settled with them in our big city ghettos for the poor, and are doing the best they can to make it in this fresh, new country

In his new book ***Anansi Boys*** (William Morrow, New York 330 pp., trade hardcover, $26.95), it has occurred to Gaiman to play a new variation on that general theme, this time having the local deities and mighty spirits of West Africa join the thoroughly involuntary journeys of their believers and speculates wittily on what might have happened if they'd joined their true believers as they sailed chained in the bowels of slave ships so that they might be purchased by white settlers in the Caribbean and continued to trail after numbers of them generations later as—this time more or less voluntarily—they took it into their heads as free citizens to emigrate to other places such as England

The Anansi boys are two brothers fathered by the god Anansi. He is the Spider God since, as with the classic Egyptian deities of the huge tomb murals and papyrus scrolls, the West African gods are very much sprung from Nature, not against it, and their strength comes from being a part of, and emotionally akin to, the animals they represent



RIGHT: Judith Berman gives a nod to Kafka in her novel, Bear Daughter. *Cover art by Don Seegmiller*

Anansi is the sly trickster god who delights in carrying out clever pranks on his fellow deities and then telling hilarious tales while bragging about how again and again he's defeated and made fools of gods much bigger and far stronger than himself through devious and complex stratgems that strongly resemble the sly webs built by the animals he represents

By the way, have you read that science has recently figured out that the shiny strands of the webs spiders build are little prisms that create the illusion it's a little blue hole through which you can escape into the sky and freedom instead of being the deadly trap it really is? I thought I'd share that with you

One of the two brothers is the sweet but rather feckless Fat Charlie, who is not fat at all, only a lifelong victim of the nickname

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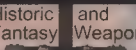

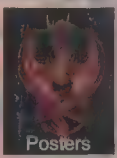

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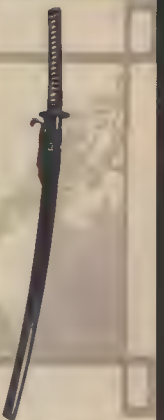

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his tricksy father gave him, and Spider, who is slick and smooth as he can be. Because of their shared parentage both them are partially gods. Spider relishes this and skillfully uses it. Fat Charlie doesn't and doesn't.

Charlie and Spider encounter a wide range of formidable women—Gaiman's women tend to be formidable and I like them for that—ranging from Detective Constable Daisy Day, who is hell on evil-doers, to a brief goddess you hope to the other gods you never have to deal with, to the ancient and awe-inspiring Mrs. Dunwaddy and her coven of witches in Orlando, Florida. Talk about formidable!

And, again as always, Gaiman serves up a fine crop of villains, natural and supernatural. Grahame Coats, who hides his ceaseless menace behind obscuring clouds of posy clichés, endless homilies ironically deployed, and frequent and irritating use of the exclamation "Absatively" is the vile head of the Coats Agency which specializes in screwing its talented clients as much as possible. Tiger is as mean a god as you could ever hope not to encounter but, sadly, you probably have already done so more than once.

Their adventures take place in this world and a variety of others and are wild and wonderful, sometimes scary, and very often hilarious and, like any really good fantasy, have a lot to teach you about reality.

The main message and supreme gift in this genuinely dazzling and highly entertaining book so far as I'm concerned is that, at its very end, Gaiman is generous enough to give us a thundering great revelation about the sister gods, what they really are, what they really did, and why we should revere and worship them unreservedly.

That's the biggest bonus on a great stack of bonuses.

I've said before and will, doubtless, say again that science fiction is really a subdivision of fantasy and therefore its fitting and proper to review books of that ilk in *Realms*. I suspect that ***Platinum Pohl: The Collected Best Stories by Frederick Pohl,*** (edited by James Frenkel, Tor Books, New York, 463 pp., trade hardcover, $27.95) will strike many as an extreme test of this thesis, but the solemn truth is Fred Pohl is a spectacular example of what I'm talking about.

He is at the same time one of the most towering and defining figures in the history and creation of American Science Fiction and one of the skillfullest (I'm sure my computer checker won't buy into that word but to hell with it) genre busters in that field. He has boldly stretched it in all directions, often turned it totally inside out and many times upended it so that it stood on its head. Also there are very few in that realm who have so clearly and consistently and so effectively employed it primarily as a stern sermon to convert the misguided and awaken the stupefied.

This book is—and it's rather startling when you think about it—the first attempt to assemble all of Pohl's best short fiction in one volume. It is illuminatingly edited and introduced with a fine forward and brief essays at the head of each story by James Frenkel. There are very few people who are as good as he is at doing those things and it's obvious this book is very clearly a particular labor of love since he's exceeded even his usual high standards.

The stories range from early work done way back in the forties when Pohl was a bright young fellow and science fiction was pretty much the province of smart-ass kids and maybe the best way in the whole world for young readers to lord it over their startled and confused parents who, suddenly faced with totally incomprehensible news stories about a new and totally weird packet full of wholly new technologies, would gaze at their offspring with astonishment (and even a touch of respect) as they heard them coolly explain the subtleties of orbital and escape velocities.

These carefully selected tales really are platinum Pohl, so there's not a foot misplaced in all the 30 stories. There's "The Meeting," produced by the magical partnership of Pohl and C.M. Kornbluth, which produced the novel *The Space Merchants* at its height and which was tragically cut off by Kornbluth's death at

NEW YOUNG ADULT FANTASY BOOKS

The Inheritance Trilogy Book 2: Eldest, by Christopher Paolini, Knopf, 2005
Following a costly victory against the forces of the evil Emperor Galbatorix, Eragon and his dragon Saphira journey to Ellesmera, to further Eragon's magical training under the tutelage of the elves. At the same time, Eragon's cousin, Roran, embarks upon a quest of his own, to protect the villagers of Carvahall from the Emperor's retaliation. One ally is lost, secrets are revealed and the story continues to unfold in the second book of the Inheritance trilogy. Generally, Eldest is a great read with an intriguing storyline, but Paolini's influences remain all too obvious as he treads upon some familiar territory. The last book in the series will really determine how well Paolini pulls it all off.

The Sisters Grimm: The Fairy-Tale Detectives, by Michael Buckley, Amulet Books, 2005
The Sisters Grimm: The Unusual Suspects, by Michael Buckley, Amulet Books, 2005
When orphaned sisters Sabrina and Daphne Grimm are sent to live with their newly-discovered grandmother, Granny Relda, in the small town of Ferryport Landing, they're introduced to a bizarre family heritage involving immortal fairytale characters. In a town where Snow White teaches school, Prince Charming is the mayor, the Three Pigs (in human form) are cops, and the so-called Everafters dwell in secret alongside regular mortals, it takes a very special kind of person to investigate when things go wrong. Now, the Grimm sisters must contend with angry giants, monsters stalking the school, and secrets galore, all while trying to find their missing parents. A wonderfully twisted take on old stories, and a great start to a new series—though rather reminiscent of Bill Willingham's excellent Fables comic book series. Fans of The Spiderwick Chronicles and A Series of Unfortunate Events should check these books out.

The Lucy Chronicles: High School Bites, by Liza Conrad, NAL/JAM, 2005
It's Dracula all over again when Lucy Hellenberg discovers that she's the descendant of a certain not-so-fictional heroine, and that the master vamp re and his descendants have been stalking her family for generations. Luckily, Lucy's family is very good at fighting vampires, and she'll have some help from her friends— including the latest in the Van Helsing line. There is a healthy dose of Buffy-esque attitude thrown in here, and ultimately this book is an entertaining update on the Dracula mythos.

Rebel Angels, by Libba Bray, Delacorte Press, 2005
Gemma Doyle continues to explore the limits of her magical powers while dodging the manipulations of two separate secret societies out to either kill or co-opt her and the control over the Realms she represents. This is the second book in a fascinating series set in Victorian England, which can best be described as Harry Potter meets A Little Princess. Bray really knows how to invoke the self-contradictory, atmospheric feel of the period and her characters reflect the mood quite nicely.

Wizards At War, by Diane Duane, Harcourt, 2005
Teen wizards Nita, Kit, Dairine, and their ali es are challenged like never before when all of the adult wizards across the universe start losing their powers, just as a great evil threatens to destroy everything once and for all. It's up to the heroes to save the day once more, but they'll pay a heavy toll in the process. If not the best in the series to date, it's certainly one of the most intense, with promises more resolution to come in future books.

an early age, leaving us all to wonder forevermore what those two might have done. "The Greening of Bed-Stuy" is a tough, tremendously touching small masterpiece of the urban fantastic, and I was deeply delighted to see the inclusion of one of my all-time favorites, "The Day the Martians Came," which is short and to the point and has one of the sharpest and most deeply satisfying kickers I think I have ever read.

Fantastically good science fiction/fantasy. As time goes by it becomes clearer and clearer that Robert E. Howard really is one of those rare and unique talents very seldom produced. His example has spawned what I suppose by now are genuinely uncountable rapt imitations varying greatly in quality and sincerity. Even though the very best of them are quite skillfully rendered and highly entertaining, the whole bunch of them massed together only serve to illuminate and emphasize how strange and unalike all others are the stories this strange man wrote.

The Coming of Conan the Cimmerian (illustrated by Mark Schultz, Del Rey Books, New York, 394 pp., trade hardcover, $29.95) and ***The Conquering Sword of Conan*** (illustrated by Gregory Manchess, Del Rey Books, New York, 394 pp., trade paperback, $15.95) are musts for anyone genuinely interested in Howard's work, for not only have the people who've put them together done their best to scrupulously scrub the stories in them clean of the presumptuous revisions and additions and other "improvements" they have been subjected to in the course of appearing in ever so many prior publications, but they have also seen to it that their pages contain all sorts of illuminating stuff dug out of God only knows what collapsing old boxes and rusting, dusty cabinets that is pure shining gold to anyone genuinely curious to seen how Howard worked his magic.

There are letters and maps and rough drafts A and B and first submitted drafts and synopses titled and untitled and meticulous notes on typescripts and original texts and their chronology and detailed histories of Howard's world written by Howard so that he could build his worlds better to the honestly admitted awe of such other wizardly world builders as Howard Phillips Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith and there are also very helpful and illuminating notes by scholarly scholars.

And it is great fun to see different talented artists at play with the highly illustratable tales of Howard's mighty muscular heroes and his delicious yet formidable heroines and to watch them use their pencils and ink to play with the skin textures and anatomical peculiarities of Howard's monsters and see how monstrous they can make them.

But, of course, the main thing is the stories themselves, all scraped clean and brightly polished to look as much as possible as they did when they were originally written: the first thirteen of them in *Coming* and the last five in *Conquering Sword* and every one of them still totally unique and deeply unlike any of the others written since.

—Gahan Wilson

A Feast for Crows, George R.R. Martin, Bantam Spectra, New York, 784 pp., hard cover, $28.00, ISBN 0-553-80150-3.

I wish I could be more enthusiastic about *A Feast for Crows*. Martin's latest is a bit of a disappointment compared to its mighty predecessors. This is partly due to the bizarre way he has chosen to present the novel to the public. When the manuscript grew too long for a single volume, he split it in two; but rather than giving us the first half of the full story, with its many characters and subplots interwoven with his customary skill, Martin ripped half the characters and attendant subplots out, so that the present book tells, as he puts it, "all the story for half the characters, rather than half the story for all the characters." A more perversely wrong-headed approach is hard to imagine. A novel is an organic whole; you can't perform this kind of radical surgery without dire results. Awkward lacunae and anticlimactic offstage business, sometimes even involving the death of characters—all evidence of literary amputation—deflate the dramatic impact and coherence of an already demanding plot, and it seems unlikely to me that the next volume will be able to redress these problems by filling in the gaps of this one. And what gaps they are! Missing entirely or largely are such major characters as Tyrion, Jon Snow, Brandon Stark, Daenerys, Stannis, and Davos. Arya is present, but underused, stripped of her name and much of her spirit in an apprenticeship to the priest-assassins known as the Faceless Men.

Instead, Martin focuses on other characters, many of them introduced for the first time: a bevy of grim Greyjoys; the court of House Martell in Dorne, where Princess Myrcella Baratheon dwells, promised to the prince of that venomous desert land; Cersei Lannister, the Queen Regent, who continues to make Lady Macbeth look like Mother Teresa; Brienne, the Maid of Tarth, who quests for the missing Sansa Stark; Samwell Tarly, dispatched to Oldtown by Jon Snow with orders to forge his master's chain at the center of learning called the Citadel, where mysterious doings are afoot; Jaime Lannister, the one-handed commander of the Kingsguard, estranged from his twin/lover Cersei, and Sansa, living in the Eyrie under the assumed

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Burns takes her brother Peter
silvery bracelet because it looks good with
her outfit. Little does she realize it's the ke
another world — until a green-haired
girl steps out of middle of the living ma
and asks Jody to help in a quest to find a
wizard or a demon-slayer and rescue her
family from a great evil.
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Jody, they are pressured to
But the Watcher has other
world, a scary villain, griffins and
talking trees, what more can a
ader ask for in a
fantasy novel!"

identity of Alayne Stone, daughter of the Machiavellian Littlefinger, the man who betrayed her father. And these are just the point of view characters.

Martin had written himself into a corner after Book 3, *A Storm of Swords*. He had killed off so many characters and concluded so many plot lines in the process that he had no choice but to introduce new ones. In that sense, *Feast*—and, presumably, its other half, the forthcoming *A Dance with Dragons*—is all about setting the stage for the rest of the epic. But unfortunately, the new characters are not as compelling as the old, and the old characters presented here are, with the exceptions of Jaime and Arya, among the least interesting of that set. Arya, as noted, is underused; her former intensity missing. Jaime fares better, continuing his emergence as a surprisingly sympathetic individual, though perhaps too much "Tyrion-lite." The biggest change is in Sansa, who, under the creepy tutelage of Littlefinger, begins to acquire some small degree of wisdom—without, it must be said, seeming to grow a whit more intelligent in the process. And as new plot lines sprawl out in all directions, there is a worrisome sense that Martin may be succumbing to soap-opera-itis.

This would be a lot to ask readers to swallow except for one crucial fact. Martin is a towering talent who writes rings around his contemporaries. When it comes to epic fantasy, his only peers are writers like Steven Erikson and R. Scott Baker, who are clearly indebted to his work. *A Feast for Crows* may suffer from self-inflicted wounds, but there's plenty of life in it yet.

The Narrows, Alex Irvine, Del Rey, New York, 352 pp., trade paperback, $13.95, ISBN 0-345-46698-5.

The Narrows, Alexander Irvine's third novel, is the most forceful repudiation of the traditional consolations of fantasy to appear from a genre writer since Michael Swanwick gave us the *The Iron Dragon's Daughter*, which it resembles in the superficial details of an industrial setting imbued with magic and in the deeper mechanics of its art.

There is plenty to astonish in *The Narrows*, whose title is a translation from the French of *Detroit*, where the novel is set. Irvine's clever conceit is to imagine a WWII-era America in which history is more or less the same as what we know—with the addition of magic and mythical objects and creatures hovering just above the perceptual horizon while playing a central role in the conduct of the war both "over there" and on the home front. Thus the novel's memorable opening line: "Midnight in the golem factory."

That's where Jared Cleaves works. Rendered unfit for military service by a childhood injury, Jared has been selected by the mysterious Office of Esoteric Investigation to secretly helps an elderly rabbi, Moises, manufacture golems on an assembly line in a building on the Ford plant in Detroit. The golems are sent to Europe to fight the Nazis,

who are similarly availing themselves of weaponry drawn from the Nordic mythos. In the Pacific, the Japanese are doing likewise.

Jared's 4-F status causes him endless guilt and shame, and he dreams of playing a more heroic role in the conflict. He gets his chance when he is approached by a bevy of shady individuals who hint at secret plots and cloak-and-dagger spy scenarios that Jared finds irresistible. There's Carlton Swerdlow, his swinish boss on the "Frankenline"; Grant Meadows of OEI; Billy Miller, who may or may not be a German spy; John Dash, whose allegiances are even more difficult to pin down; and a crow claiming to be a Native American shaman trapped in corvid form.

Jared becomes entangled with each of these individuals, a pawn in a multitude of chess games being played simultaneously on a single board. Everyone is interested in a secret project at the Willow Run plant in Ypsilanti, where Jared's wife, Colleen, works, and he persuades her, under false pretenses, to uncover information about it, putting her and their young daughter, Emily, at risk. Soon his marriage is also in danger. Meanwhile, racial tensions in Detroit are rising, building toward a violent climax that seems connected not only to whatever is going on at Willow Run but to Jared himself. The injury that keeps him home while other young men are fighting and dying was incurred in a mishap involving the Nain Rouge, a malevolent supernatural dwarf whose appearances track to cataclysmic events in the history of Detroit; now the creature has reappeared, and Jared fears that whatever is about to happen will destroy the city and the people he loves.

In his previous books, Irvine used fantasy tropes not to escape from reality but as a means of entering into it more fully. Here he sets up an opposition between the fantastic in all its forms and the mundane satisfactions and fulfillments of life as a husband and father. The magical elements of the tale are further equated with Jared's immature longings for adventure and heroism. Ultimately, Irvine suggests that to be an adult, one must embrace the mundane to the exclusion of the fantastic, indeed, that true heroism consists of precisely this renunciation. It's Dorothy using the ruby slippers to travel back to Kansas all over again. I didn't like it then, and I don't like it now.

But that's merely a philosophical difference of opinion. On literary terms, *The Narrows* is a step forward for Irvine, as if he's taken the

title to heart and narrowed his focus, sharpened his writing and his plotting, which is under tighter control here, though still somewhat sprawling and diffuse toward the end. He is a writer worth reading and worth arguing about.

Bear Daughter, Judith Berman, Ace Books, New York, 422 pp., trade paperback $16.00, ISBN 0-441-01322-8

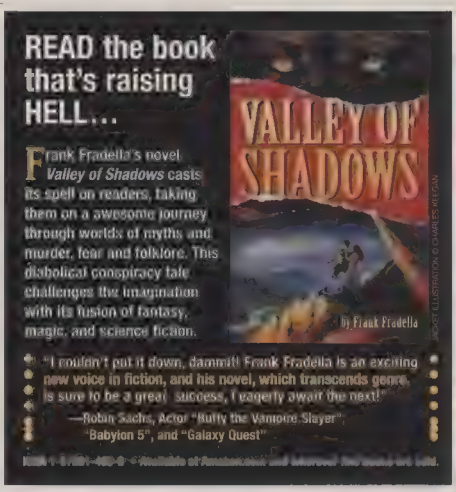
Judith Berman's first novel is a rich and compelling transformation tale. It begins with a nod to another great story involving metamorphosis: "When Cloud was twelve years old, she woke up one morning to discover she had become a girl." But while there is an homage to Kafka in that line, what comes after is more apt to evoke Le Guin and Tolkien. Berman also draws from folklore and mythology, especially Native American, and specifically Pacific Northwestern; an anthropologist, she knows these subjects intimately and weaves them with the sure hand of an expert into a remarkably accomplished debut.

Cloud is the offspring of a bear god, Lord Stink, and a human woman, Thrush. When she abruptly changes into two-legged form, she loses touch with her four-legged "mask." Lost along with it are memories of her earlier life and most of the supernatural powers that are her birthright. She retains the ability to see and interact with the spirit-servants of shamans and with the immortal "first people" of the world, gods that, like her father, are apotheoses of animal species able to take on human form.

Cloud finds herself in Sandspit Town, which is ruled by the cruel King Rumble, the man who killed Lord Stink and, in doing so, took on a portion of his godly might. Although the gods are immortal, they can still die, only to be reborn. But the theft of Lord Stink's power by Rumble and the shaman Bone, a creepy wizard whose spirit-servants are a white dog, an octopus, and a drowned woman, has kept him from being reborn, with increasingly dire results to both the mortal and immortal realms.

Barely tolerated by Rumble, able to steal only brief interludes with Thrush, who is now Rumble's wife, Cloud's existence in Sandspit Town is lonely and precarious, her days spent in anxious fear, her nights troubled by dreams in which the spirits of her bear brothers cry out for help from amid a welter of bones.

The bones of Lord Stink are there as well. Driven from Sandspit, Cloud embarks unwillingly on a quest to find the bones and bring them to the mysterious Headwaters Women, who live in a house at the edge of the world. There she must hurl the bones into a pit of fire in order to set the balance right again. Cloud's journey takes on the mythic resonance of Frodo's similar trek to Mount Doom, but Berman puts a distinctive Native American spin on things. Her intricate world building, the grace of her writing, and her memorable characters all herald the arrival of a significant talent. ❧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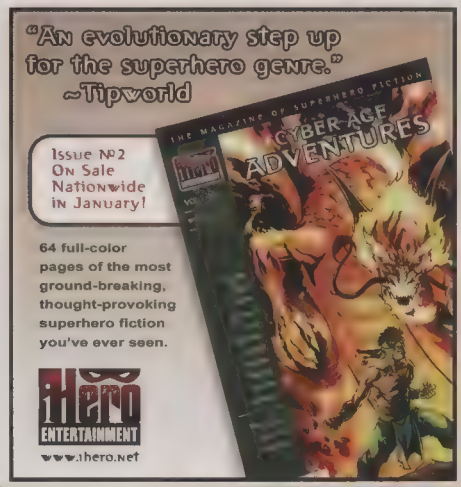
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ONE DAY WE MAY HAMMER ALL OUR SWORDS INTO PLOUGHSHARES. BUT FOR NOW WE CAN START WITH JUST ONE.

Lady -OF- Ashuelot

BY KARIN L. ABRAHAMSON
ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL KERR

The Greyhound bus's grumble brought Gwen's head up from her hammering. She peered out from the sweltering blacksmith shop into the cool October sunshine where the hillsides clung to the red of the New Hampshire fall. Something at the bus caught her eye. A turn of head, a lift of chin, a cutting movement of hand. Lancelot.

Gwen's hammer fell, her loving creation and the landscape forgotten. The stroke broke the delicate leaf she'd fashioned. The coal burned sour in her nostrils. She stepped around the anvil to the door.

It couldn't be.

But he stood apart from the tourists, come on a day trip to see the Ashuelot covered bridge. He carried a simple over-the-shoulder bag as if used to traveling light and his dark hair fell back from his temples and hooked behind his ears, meeting the collar of his white tee-t-shirt and leather jacket.

He surveyed the town of 40 run-down colonial houses strung along the road like antique pearls, then headed towards Gwen's place and the blue sign at her gate: *'Ironwork and Oddities. Gallery and Bed and Breakfast.'* His walk swayed like someone who had ridden horses for too many years.

Lancelot, she was sure.

Gwen rubbed her stomach. She stepped out the door still wearing her leather apron and stood next to a barrel of pink-blossomed impatiens.

He looked almost the same as when she'd last seen him, except for the small pot belly that rode over the top of his snug low-slung jeans. Almost the same as when he'd tried to father a child for their King. As when he'd ridden away with a promise to return.

She'd learned later he said that to all the girls. And she was a woman now, though the bitterness of her barrenness still rode her.

She crossed her arms and leaned against the doorframe. "Hello Lance. What'd you want?"

"Gwen? Little Gwen?" He rubbed his eyes and started past the peeling picket fence and up the gravel driveway. "Is it really you?"

"I haven't changed that much," she said dryly and flicked at a piece of long fair hair she'd sucked on as she worked. She looked down at herself.

Well maybe she had changed. She had muscles now, from years of forge work. She had scars and singed hairs on her hands from the spattering clinker and metal. Instead of long gowns and fur she wore jeans and a t-shirt that were stained with sweat stains and sweat.

Lance stopped a pace from her and looked her up and down. "Still a beauty."

Gwen rolled her eyes. "Cut the crap. What do you want?"

Lance stepped up to her. "Aren't you going to greet me? Aren't you even a little happy to see an old friend?" He placed his hands on her shoulders and pulled her into a hug. "God, Gwen, you feel good. I've been looking for you for ages."

Gwen stiffened in his arms, even as the scent of him—riding leather and man sweat—filled her nostrils and set her knees to shaking. For ages. For ages she waited for him. Through the early middle ages, and the late, and the renaissance, and the age of enlightenment. When she'd finally become tired of waiting she'd emigrated and had taken up a new life here.

"You never looked too hard, because I was right where you left me. Then I decided I'd waited long enough. I came here with the Lady of the Lake."

"She's here?" He set her away from him His gaze flickered

Gwen nodded and swallowed at the surge of jealousy. Another of Lance's conquests, cast off when he'd had what he wanted The Lady had been thrown over for Gwen. It had been a point of contention between the two women for centuries, but they'd resolved it lately. The two of them—aging, single women—needed each other They didn't need Lance destroying that gentle peace

"So one more time, Lance What is it you want?"

He gave her an innocent look—the same look he'd had when he seduced her behind her husband's back "Nothing, Gwen. Only to see you and spend some time. Old time's sake and all that." He lightly stroked her cheek with his finger

She jerked away. "Get thrown over by someone? If you're looking for comfort, you won't find it here."

Lance looked at her and finally sighed. "You're not the girl I used to know."

"And thank God for that."

"I just wanted to see you. To talk Maybe to ask for your help Things are changing in Britannia. It's time for the King to return."

Gwen swayed She looked into the shed where the breath of the old vacuum cleaner gave life to the forge and her loving leaf creation lay destroyed on the anvil. "Wait a moment."

The King return? She went inside and turned off the vacuum. The air stilled. Only the coal fire burned and she shoveled the burning coals into a heap, the other fuel away from the flame The heat in the shed dissipated. She picked up the warped metal leaf and felt a familiar sadness as she tossed it into the heap of scrap in the corner Then she hung up her apron, splashed water onto her face from the bucket by the forge, and stepped back out to Lance.

In the sunlight, his dark hair gleamed silver at the temples. Age had found him too, but the crags of his face were the same. And his eyes. And his hands She'd always remembered his hands.

He looked past her into the shed "What's with the smithy? I never would have figured you'd get into that."

She glanced over her shoulder The coal-bed still glowed, waiting for air to bring it to life So like the very earth that burgeoned with creation given the right care. Or a woman's womb with the gift of seed At least that was what the ancient alchemists had said.

"It's creative," she said, not telling of the need it filled She led him past the lines of day lilies still blooming even this late in the fall, to the guest house she had bought when she came to the town. Now its white paint had grayed and the tourists came less frequently to this backwater stretch of highway

In her kitchen of worn linoleum and white cupboards chipped with time, she waved him to a chair at the table and turned to the sink to put the kettle on for tea "So tell me." She glanced at him

Lance had thrown his jacket on the back of his chair. His biceps filled his shirt sleeves, stretching the fabric

She pulled her gaze away when she caught herself staring at his hands

"It's the legend, Gwen Britain is in need."

She stayed silent The whole world was in need The Lady's powers had faded so that even Britain was laid bare and only this small town still nestled in her protection—and even then her power needed help

"Britain needs Arthur to unite the people Right now the Scots want to separate The Welsh are making noises And at home the people fragment. They care about their country, sure, but they and the government are at odds. The leaders are making bad choices We're going to war for all the wrong reasons. We need a King—someone to lead us—someone strong the people can have faith in."

"And you want Arthur" She turned back to him and leaned against the counter "The man who couldn't even stop his wife from having an affair The man you cuckolded. You want him to save you"

"Us, Gwen. We need him to save us."

"I don't live in Britain anymore."

"His influence could save the world."

She shook her head "No one would believe No one would follow"

"They would if he had the sword."

The room stilled except for the kettle's whistle Gwen poured hot water over teabags in two mugs, trying to stop her trembling She handed one mug to Lance and hauled a carton of milk from the fridge and a box of sugar cubes from a cupboard near the sink

The sword The sword they were all bound to through their oaths to Arthur The sword of star-iron that through Merlin's magic sustained—still sustained—the heart of the Court of Camelot

She looked out back to the garden she and the Lady had built when the other woman had still been healthy. They had warded each corner in the ancient ways, to make the soil fecund, to keep blight away. Tall bamboo filled the back corner, tall iris leaves and lily stood in front of that. Low beds of marigold and begonia and purple alyssum gave color Ivy trailed over old stone and iron trellises

But the plants were fading All of them turned brown at the edges from the strange weather of the summer She didn't want to see them die

In one corner a terra cotta face peered out from between leaves of sumac blazing red with fall It was a face the Lady had made when she still worked in clay, a mask, made from memory, of the only man the Lady had ever truly loved

Lancelot

"I need you to give me the sword, Gwen. He left it with you."

She shook her head, still gazing into the garden "I don't have it" Her gaze trailed up the hillside to the forest—those trees and plants faded, too, though at least the Lady's magic slowed the process

Lance came to her, the tea forgotten. He turned her to him and looked into her eyes "But you showed it to me when he died. You showed me the sword. We need its power"

"Use other star-iron and make a new sword Have Merlin work his magic with that." She glared at him, met his gaze unflinching

"It's gone, Gwen. The other star-iron's been swept from Britain's shores, stolen as implements—sold as artifacts. And none hold the same power as the sword. Merlin placed too much power in it. We need it."

She looked away "I buried it with Arthur. I don't have it"

"Well it isn't with him now"

She pulled away, thinking of the dark cave she and Merlin had found. "You've been to his tomb?"

Lance nodded. He caught her hand and led her to the table, placed the cup of tea in her hand and Gwen realized she was cold, so cold Cold as Arthur had been at his death. Cold as she had been at the sadness he showed at her betrayal Cold as the earth she and Merlin buried him in "Merlin He sent you"

Lance nodded. "He's gotten too old to travel and he doesn't like planes If man were meant to fly, and all that."

Gwen looked away. All these men and their swords. They came and they took and they rode away Warriors raped and pillaged and cut and hacked and it was the women who paid The women who gave themselves up for their babes And the land left barren as their wombs Why couldn't man spend his strength sustaining? Her hand went unconsciously to her belly, her gaze to the hillside out the window.

But Merlin she'd thought … he at least understood the needs of life, of the land, of the world

Instead he'd sent this … man … across the world to reclaim that which she and the Lady had hidden That which held so much power to do basic good

"I can't help you."

Lance's gaze scanned her face and he grabbed his bag "Then I guess I'd better go talk to the Lady" He stood and turned toward the door

Gwen slopped tea over herself as she scrambled after him "No! She doesn't like visitors" She grabbed his hand and halted him at the door, surprised at the strength she had—that it actually stopped him. When they first had known each other he could have pulled away as easily as a bee off a blossom Now his wrist stayed in her callused grip even as a tremor ran up her arm

He looked at her hand and then up at her. "I have to ask her. Merlin expects it. She and the sword are linked. She'll know where it is."

Gwen studied him. The face she had swooned over, had betrayed her husband for. It showed signs of years of decadence, and yet the heroic line of his chin, of his brow, still took her breath away. Should she help him? Return the sword?

"Let me talk to her." She released him when he nodded, and left her tea cup on the table, untouched. Outside she stood panting by the door and the huge planters of amber colored chrysanthemums. The house was too hot with him there. There were still too many things she felt—like begging him to tell her why he left. Like telling him she still ached for him at night.

But she was stronger than that now. She understood about men. Since Lancelot she'd tried taking other lovers but they'd left her as well. Left her alone, childless, until she learned that was all she would ever be. She looked up at the hillsides. So she'd come here.

She hurried down the street towards the old covered bridge that crossed the Ashuelot River. On both sides of the river the hills rose, laced with the broad-leafed trees that so reminded her of England's greenwood. Not like the mangy hillsides she'd seen elsewhere. So far the Lady's fading power had kept the loggers from discovering this small corner.

So far.

The river ran swift, the carcass of a huge oak lay stopped by rocks before its branches could tear the bridge out. She hurried across to the small house that stood on the far side of the water.

It sat low against the forest, its yard overgrown, a line of fallen picket fence lying amongst the tall grass, a few line of twigs still resplendent with bits of fall foliage replacing the boundary around the property. The trees and bushes inside the boundary still blushed, leaving the hillsides brown in comparison.

The powers of the Lady had drawn further inward.

She stepped over the line of foliage into cooler air and hurried to the door, knocked once and stepped inside. "My Lady?" she called.

The house ticked silently around her, light streaming through the windows in long dusty cords, cobwebs formed at the junctions of the walls. A line of wilted wildflowers trailed down the hallway towards the kitchen.

Gwen followed them. "My Lady?"

The kitchen was empty, the faucet dripping over dirty dishes in the sink. Gwen left the house, knowing where the other woman would be. Where she always waited when she went missing from the house.

Gwen turned back to the bridge and found the narrow, slippery path down to the river's edge. Tall oak and beech leaned over the trail. Birch leaves, tinged golden, shivered in a light wind and fluttered to the water. A sugar maple blushed just downriver.

She clambered down to the water and then edged along the tall grass and stones toward the bridge. At its base a smooth stone sticked into the water.

Kiss used it to fish from.

The Lady used it to contemplate her waters.

She sat huddled there, her long silver hair wild over her shoulders, her slight frame hunched over her knees as she laced the fingers of her left hand in the water. She wore a faded blue housedress. Light reflections dappled a face aged by years of effort to protect the land.

"My Lady?"

The other woman looked up from her contemplation of the water. Her delicate features showed a light tracery of lines. Her wide blue eyes showed signs of crying. "They called me a troll," she whispered.

"What?" Gwen shook her head.

"The children. They wanted to fish and I wanted to sit. They said I'm like an old troll. Then they laughed and ran away."

Gwen clambered out onto the stone and sat down beside the other woman, placing her arm around her shoulders. "It's alright. My Lady. They're young. They just don't understand how you need the water."

"But they hurt my feelings." The Lady gazed at Gwen with innocent eyes.

Gwen smoothed the other woman's hair back from her face. "Children can be cruel, My Lady."

The Lady pulled away. "I don't like it here anymore. I want to go home."

Gwen closed her eyes. How could she tell her that the home she remembered wasn't there anymore? Too many years had passed. The lake the Lady recalled was surrounded by houses now. Coal dust darkened the sky—or it had when they had come here. There was no place for a beautiful woman to bathe naked under clear stars.

"The Lady suddenly stumbled to her knees. "Who is this man? Who has come?" Her voice was eager. She smoothed her hair back from her face.

The years had not been kind to the Lady. She had drifted mentally until she lived child-like, with Gwen's care. Gwen brought her food. Gwen cleared the snow in the winter. Gwen made sure the other woman was safe, her gas furnace working, that the lady did not try to feed it wood.

"We can't go home. I've explained it to you."

The Lady pressed her lips into a line. Her body stiffened and she half-turned away.

Gwen caught the other woman's hand, all the while questioning whether she should she do this. "But someone came today. From the old country. He wants to see you."

"A man came? For me?" The Lady's eyes sparked with interest.

Gwen nodded, feeling sorrow at her lie at the Lady's eagerness. Once a long line of suitors sought the Lady. No longer. She was as lost as the stuff of her legend. They both were. The difference was that Gwen was glad to be lost from the notoriety, while the Lady missed her people, her land. The island kingdom she had gentled and maintained.

Gwen grasped the other woman's hand. "He wants the sword, My Lady." Gwen saw the momentary confusion in the other woman's eyes. "Arthur's sword. You still have it?"

The Lady's face glowed as remembrance flowed in. "Of course. It's safely in the soil where its magic can do the most good." She gestured into the water at the base of the stone. "There. Its star-iron helps me feed the land."

Gwen looked through the moving current and saw the dim outline of the grip and cross-guard. The sword had enough power to keep the Court of Camelot alive and also to help the Lady in her labors.

The Lady suddenly scrambled to her knees. "Who is this man? Who has come?" Her voice was eager. She smoothed her hair back from her face.

Gwen looked into the water. "Lancelot."

The word fell like a stone into water. Silence filled the space between the two women. Finally, the Lady breathed: "He has come for me."

Gwen jerked upright from her contemplation of Lance's face, of the feelings his arrival had stirred in her.

The lady had already scrambled to her feet, had leapt back to land to push through the low brush along the river path. "He has come for me."

She ran her fingers through her hair. "He has come. Oh, he has come." She ran her palms over her face, then down over the tattered housedress she wore, then pushed up the river bank towards her house. "He can't see me like this. I've got to bathe and dress."

Her voice floated back to Gwen, who sighed. She pushed herself up and followed the other woman. Somehow Gwen had to

make the Lady understand what would happen if the sword went back to Arthur

In the house the Lady ran her bath, steaming water filling the rust-stained porcelain The Lady pulled the dress off her shoulders, letting it drop like a flower petal to the cold tile. Her body had wilted with the years, as her power wasted with her distance from her lake and her waters. Still, her emanations had held Ashuelot as the lovely, small town it was

And when her power had dwindled too far the sword had helped.

"My Lady, please " Gwen gently touched the other woman's bare shoulder. Hard bone poked through aging flesh. "Lance has come for the sword. He wants to take it away from us He wants it to wake Arthur, to bring his power back. He thinks Arthur can save Britain from itself "

The Lady shook her head. She faced the mirror, tilting her head to catch the light, pushing her hair over her ears. "Rose water will help He always liked the scent. And oils for my hair. How could I have let it get so wild?" She ran her palm down over her cheek and frowned "But what is this?" She leaned in closer to examine the lines around her eyes. "No," she whispered. "It can't be."

"My Lady," Gwen tried to interrupt the other woman's ministrations The room filled with steam, and sweat ran between Gwen's breasts She wanted out of here, hated seeing the changes in this once powerful woman But the Lady hadn't been the same since Lancelot. Would Lance change that now? The Lady needed to be warned "He wants the sword, My Lady. Only the sword. "

The other woman shook her head as she wiped steam off the mirror "A fabrication An excuse to see me. Tell him to come tomorrow." She looked into the mirror "I'll be ready then." She leaned in closer. "Surely I will," she whispered

Gwen left for the cool fall air in the Lady's front yard. She inhaled and sighed Lance couldn't love the Lady He had left her for Gwen. Perhaps he'd really come for Gwen?

She snorted and shook her head before heading home She just wanted the man gone If Lance came down to see the Lady, she, Gwen, would come with him and make sure he left after not getting what he wanted. They needed the sword here

She'd comfort the Lady afterwards

At home she found Lancelot had moved into one of the rooms on the second floor. As if that wasn't bad enough, he'd chosen a room next to her own and had taken a shower, leaving damp footprints for her to follow across the hardwood floors.

The door to his room was open; he stood with his back to her, his hips draped in a towel, late afternoon light staining his skin golden

Gwen's face flushed as he turned to her, as the blood flowed to her head. Even with the slight pot belly he was beautiful—as beautiful as she remembered

"Gwen." He came to her as she stood stunned in the doorway She hadn't expected him to move in, hadn't expected to see him like this, didn't expect it when he leaned in and placed a kiss on her lips. He pulled back slightly. "Did you see her?"

She looked into his eyes and felt herself falling—again. Nodding, she swallowed What was this hold he had over her, this need she had for him?

"She says you can come tomorrow "

"And the sword?"

"She knows where it is."

"Then she'll give it to me " He caught Gwen's upper arms. "That's good The sword will give us Arthur back and Arthur will give us back our power, our destiny Britain will be great again." He paced around the room, Gwen still standing in the door, still trying to find the strength to move, to leave.

"It has been too long we've let the rest of the world overrun us. Too long since we were a great people The power of the sword will complete us and give us back our greatest leader." He paced and he fumed and he spoke of Britain and its power and the greatness and respect they would command in this world that had become

"But ... ," Gwen started She blinked, trying to bring her thoughts into focus "But the sword's power is creation. Britain already exists And the sword can't undo what has already been done "

Lance turned back to her. "That may be what the ancient smithes thought as they placed that iron into their furnaces, but we know better We know the strength of that sword Excalibur was made for one reason, to lead warriors, to lead a country, to lead a world."

He came to her, caught her in his arms "Don't you see, Gwen, we're the stuff of legends. People cry out for us and the dreams we raise With the sword we can rally our people. We can be great, you can be great, instead of lost in this backwater town "

He looked deep into her eyes "God, Gwen. Think what we had Think what we could have again "

And he kissed her Kissed her so hard she lost all sense of where she was, of the time, of her age, of what she had learned as a woman, of how the sword could do more than raise a country to greatness. She was a girl again and Lancelot wanted her Lancelot her beloved.

He pulled her into the bedroom and to the bed, heat blooming in her body.

It was dark when she woke in a tangle of sheets, Lancelot's arm draped over her breasts, her long hair caught under his shoulders. The air was cool in the room and Lance's body was hot. The golden glow she'd felt at his touch seared away as she stared up at the ceiling trying to understand what had happened What she had done. She studied Lance's profile in the starlight through the window

He was still elegant and strong, but he wasn't for her She didn't even love him Not the way the Lady did

The Lady

Gwen sat up, pushing Lance away, ignoring the pull of her hair, the way Lance spoke to her in his sleep

What had she done?

She looked down at her naked body, muscled under her breasts and flat abdomen She'd stepped away from men all these years, determined to make her own way, to be strong, not to be caught by the need for another Certainly not to betray a friend She rubbed her face, tried to push away the sickness she felt, the sense of his hands

She pushed the covers off and stood, the wood floor cold under her feet, the air chilling her She crossed her arms and looked at the man on the bed

The Lady's face, her excitement and hope, filled Gwen's mind

Gwen left the site of her betrayal at a run; gathering up her clothes, she ran down the hall In the bathroom she showered, scrubbing her self, but still felt unclean Then she pulled on clothing that still smelled of forge smoke and sweat At least that was honest, not the scent of sex on her fingers

She pulled on her work boots on the front porch, inhaling deep gasps of leaf-scented air Night blanketed Ashuelot. The moon had set. The river's rush placed a lulling pall across the town. The cicadas and crickets layered their songs on the air No traffic traveled this backwater bit of Highway 119

She headed for the small house by the covered bridge, her footfall clumping across the hollow structure. At the Lady's house she tried the door

Unlocked as all doors were unlocked in this peaceful town. She pushed inside The Lady slept little, usually worked, humming, in her kitchen

But no song came from the back of the house The building ticked around Gwen like a clock The air smelled of metal "My Lady?" Gwen called softly

She stepped further down the hall

"My Lady?"

Could the other woman have gone to the river? Perhaps to get the sword?

Gwen turned to check the river's edge when a small sound caught her attention Something like the sound of insect wings against a window. She stopped, listened, then followed the sound towards the Lady's bedroom, past it, to the bathroom where light seeped under the door

Gwen pushed the door open and stopped

The lady lay in the tub in a sea of red, her hands resting palm-up, like lilies in the lake where she had first lived. Her head shook as she lay there; her hair whispered cross the tiles

She looked up at Gwen and smiled

"My God! What have you done?"

Gwen fell on her knees by the tub, pulled the Lady's arms free of water. Blood oozed from the numerous cuts up her forearms.

Scrambling to her feet, Gwen rummaged the medicine cabinet for bandages. She wrapped the woman's arms tight then ran for the phone and dialed 911. Then she went back to the Lady to wait

"Why, My Lady? Why?"

The other woman shook her head, her long hair spread in wet spider silk across her brow and shoulders. She gazed up at Gwen, her eyes filled with tears that would once have sent a man to quest

"Look at me, friend. How could Lancelot love me? How could he even stand to look at me?" Her gaze shifted to the mirror and her voice fell to a whisper. "I saw. How could I face him like this?"

"Then you should have said something to me. I'd have told him to go. I'd have told him you didn't want to see him."

The lady shook her head slightly. "I love him. I would have had his child." Her eyes closed and she slumped in the tub. In the night came the wail of the ambulance.

Daylight stained the east when Gwen returned to Ashuelot. The Lady slept in the hospital, but she had lost so much blood no one knew if she would live. To live takes will. To live takes a reason and a belief in your own strength, your own worth. The Lady, it seemed had lost both. No wonder her power had faded.

Gwen stood at the roadside and looked up at the hills blushed with fall and the sunrise. The air smelled of leaves souring on the branches and of snow to come. Gwen's hands brushed her belly, rested there.

If the Lady died, this place, this haven they had come to, would be bare to depredations of the world. It would have no protection.

Except the sword. And Gwen herself.

But Lancelot would take Excalibur if he found it and the land would be at the mercy of man—could become barren as the desolate cities she had escaped. She could not let that happen.

She checked her watch. Lance had always been an early riser. She had to do whatever she was going to do.

She started for the river.

It ran deep and cold under the bridge and its spray chilled her. She balanced out onto the Lady's flat rock and looked down into the water. The first light of day glanced off the surface, hiding the treasure there.

She plunged her hand into the water, down, down into the depths until her shoulder touched the water and her t shirt was soaked.

Her fingers closed on the ornate grip, on the jeweled cross. She yanked upwards and the sword came free from its hold in the riverbed. The water seemed to part around it. The sunlight caught on its edges, on the water dripping down her arm. Her breath caught in her throat.

It was a beautiful thing. This thing formed of star-iron mined in the ancient days of the world, the same star-iron the ancients worshipped as the seed that gave life to the world. She held it up to the flame of sunlight and wished for other choices.

When she pulled the sword back down to her side it was as if a light went out. She hurried back to her house and looked up at Lancelot's window, still dark. The man was no longer the vigorous lover of his youth, just as she was no longer the girl smitten with a fair warrior's attentions.

She ducked around to her workshop, shoveled coal onto the embers of yesterday's flame and turned the vacuum on. Soon flames bit at the coal, caught and heated the inside of the forge. Soon the heat filled the shop. She buckled on her apron.

Gwen closed her eyes.

She gripped the sword, then plunged it into the heat.

The metal sang at the contact. The sword was not intended for this treatment. The sword had been made as an icon for all time. But that was in another time. A man's world. A world of warriors and courtly love and manners and kingdoms.

Now there was just the world and it needed the seed of star-iron far more than it needed another sword.

The metal glowed. She used her tongs to turn the sword in the flame. Let it heat evenly. She could show the blade at least that respect.

When the metal was white-hot she drew it forth. She set a wedge in the anvil top and laid the blade across it. She picked up the hammer and hefted it in her grasp.

Her muscles tensed as she raised it. As she let it fall.

She plunged her hand into the water, down, down into the depths, until her shoulder touched the water and her t shirt was soaked.

Metal rang against metal as the hammer broke the blade's back across the wedge. Sparks flew across the room, against her leather apron, against her cheek. Pain, pain as the metal sang.

Years fell on Gwen's shoulders.

She lifted the hammer again and let it fall. The tip of the sword broke free and the blade's music stopped. From the house came the sound of screaming.

She shifted the broken sword so another section lay across the wedge. Hammered again, and felt age press on her. Her hair covered and went brittle against her shoulders. She had to do this. She had to last. Each blow, each section of the sword destroyed the power that had held all of them in the hearts of legend.

In a tomb somewhere Arthur withered away.

Merlin would feel his powers drain.

But in return the metal, freed from its form, could feed this place, the land, and preserve it.

At least that would do good.

When she had severed the blade into four she left the shop. Her back bent under the weight of the pieces in her carry bag. Arthritis nipped at her knees and hips. But she was not finished.

She ignored Lance when he tried to stop her, his spindly arms and legs no match for her determination.

"What have you done? What have you done?" he cried as she left him in the driveway and went up to the hills.

What indeed, she thought as she struggled through the forest to the farthest point she could walk that day. Undone a dream. Defiled a legend.

Still, when she stood on the first hilltop and looked out across the land, she knew had acted rightly. The rich hills rolled away in folds of trees, small farmsteads, the winding threads of streams and rivers. To the west the Connecticut River unwound toward the sea.

Light filtered down through the trees and placed golden filigree on the soil. A squirrel chattered at her from the trees and a tanager flashed its scarlet tail and flew away. So much life.

She dug in her bag and pulled out one section of Excalibur, then held it up to the sky. The sunlight seemed to flow into the metal and down her arm.

She bent and plunged the metal into the soil. Streaks of lightening flashed across the tree roots, across the soil, and the metal hummed. She looked out across the land at the three other hilltops she had chosen.

When she was done it would be a garden, this place her dying body and the star-iron would preserve.

Better one garden, than men united by a sword.

She smiled to herself and all her years of barrenness fell away. As

IT'S HARD
TO KNOW
TRUST
DEALING
WITH THE
TRAVEL WITH BRIDGE
RICHARD
PARKS

In the early evening

a tiny moth-demon was trying to batter its way into my room through a tear in the paper screen, no doubt attracted by the scent of poverty. I was debating whether to frighten the silly thing away or simply crush it, when the Widow Tamahara's delightful voice sent the poor creature fluttering away as fast as its little wings could carry it

"Yamada-san, you have a visitor!"

Tamahara kneeled by the shoji screen that was the only door to my rooms. Besides the volume, there was an edge of excitement in the formidable old woman's voice that worried me just a little. The fact that arlstocracy impressed her had worked to my advantage more than once when the rent was late, but her deference meant that just about anyone could get closer to me than might be healthy. That is, if they were of the right station in life. Anyone else giving a hint of trouble in her establishment she would throw out on their ear, if they were lucky

"Who is it, Tamahara-san?"

"A messenger and that is all I know. She s waiting in the courtyard with her escort."

She?

Well, that explained why Widow Tamahara had not simply brought the person to my rooms. That would not have been proper, and the Widow Tamahara always did the right thing, to the degree that she understood what "the right thing" was.

"Just a moment," I said.

After some thought I tucked a long dagger into my sleeve but left my *tachi* where it was. I wasn't wearing my best clothes, but my best would have been equally unimpressive. At least everything was clean. I followed Tamahara out into the courtyard. The sun had set but there was light enough still.

The woman kneeled near a small pine tree, flanked on either side by her escorts. No rough provincial warriors these, the two men were polite, impassive, well dressed, and well armed. The younger man wore the red and black clothing and bore the butterfly mon of the Taira Clan; the other wore plain black and bore no family crest or identification at all. I judged them as best I could. The escort wearing Taira livery I think I could have bested, if absolutely necessary and with a bit of luck. But the other . . well, let s just say I didn t want any trouble. I also could not escape the feeling that we had met before.

I bowed formally and then kneeled in front of the woman. I noted the nightmost warrior's quick glance at my sleeve and how he inched almost imperceptibly closer, all the while not appearing to have noticed or moved at all. The man was even more formidable than I had suspected, but now my attention was on the woman.

Her kimono was very simple, as befitted a servant. Two shades of blue at most, though impeccably appropriate for the time of year. She wore a boshi with a long veil that circled the brim and hid her features. Naturally, she did not remove it. She merely bowed again from her seated position and held out a scroll resting on the palms of her small hands.

I took the offered scroll, all the while careful to make no sudden movements, and unrolled it to read.

The Peony bows
to no avail; the March wind
is fierce, unceasing.

Caught like a rabbit in a snare. And so damn easily. Just the first three lines of a tanka. The poem was not yet complete, of course; the rest was up to me.

I looked at the shadow of the woman's face, hidden behind the veil. "Are you instructed to await my reply?"

Again she bowed without speaking. The escort on her right produced a pen case and ink. I considered for a few moments, then added the following two lines:

The donkey kneels down to rest
In his shadow, flowers grow.

My poetic skills—never more than adequate—were a little rusty and the result wasn't better than passable. Yet the form was correct and the meaning, like that of the first segment, more than clear to the one who would read it. The woman took the message from me, bowed again, then rose as one with her escort and withdrew quickly without further ceremony. The Widow Tamahara watched all this from the discreet distance of the veranda encircling the courtyard.

"Is this work?" she asked when I passed her on the way back to my room. "Will you be paid?"

"Yes' seems the likely answer to both," I said, though that was mostly to placate the old woman. I was fairly certain that I would be the one paying, one way or the other.

Later that evening I didn't bother to prepare my bedding. I wanted, fully clothed and in the darkness of my room, for my inevitable visitor. The summons was clear and urgent, but I couldn't simply answer it. The matter was much more complicated than that.

The full moon cast the man's shadow across the thin screen that was my doorway. It wasn't a mistake; he wanted me to know he was there. I pulled the screen aside, but I was pretty sure I knew who would be waiting.

He kneeled on the veranda, the hilt of his sword clearly visible. "Lord Yamada? My name is Kanemore."

"Lord" was technically correct but a little jarring to hear applied to me again. Especially coming from a man who was the son of an emperor. I finally realized who he was. "Prince Kanemore. You were named after the poet, Taira no Kanemore, weren't you?" I asked.

He smiled then, or perhaps it was a trick of the moonlight. "My mother thought that having a famous poet for a namesake might gentle my nature. In that I fear she was mistaken. So, you remember me."

"I do. Even when you were not at Court, your sister Princess Teiko always spoke highly of you."

He smiled faintly. "And so back to the matter at hand. Lord Yamada, I am charged to bring you safely to the Imperial compound."

The light was poor, but I used what there was to study the man a little more closely than I'd had time to do at our meeting earlier in the day. He was somewhat younger than I, perhaps thirty or so, and quite handsome except for a fresh scar that began on his left cheek and reached his jawline. He studied me just as intently, I didn't want to speculate on what his conclusions might be. Whether caused by my involvement or the situation itself—and I still didn't have any idea what that was—Kanemore was not happy. His face betrayed nothing, but his entire being was as tense as a bow at full draw.

"I am ready, Prince Kanemore."

"Just 'Kanemore,' please. With the Emperor's permission, I will renounce my title and found a new clan, since it is neither my destiny nor wish to ascend the throne."

"I am Goji. Lead on then."

The streets were dark and poorly lit. I saw the flare of an *onibi* down an alleyway and knew the ghosts were about. At this time of evening demons were a possibility too, but one of the beauties of Kyoto was that the multitude of temples and shrines tended to make the atmosphere uncomfortable for most of the fiercer demons and monsters. The rest, like that moth-demon, were used to skulking about the niches and small spaces of the city, unnoticed and deliberately so—being vulnerable to both exorcism and common steel.

We reached the Kamo River without incident and crossed at the Shijo Bridge. The full moon was high now, reflecting off the water. Farther downstream I saw an entire procession of ghost lights floating above the water. I'm not sure that Kanemore saw the *onibi* at all. His attention was focused on the moon's reflection as he paused for a second or two to admire it. I found this oddly reassuring. A man who did not pause to view a full moon at opportunity had no soul. But the fact that his moon viewing amounted to little more than a

hesitation on Shijo Bridge showed his attention to duty I already knew I did not want Kanemore as my enemy Now I wondered if we could be friends

"Do you know what this is about?" I asked

"Explanations are best left to my sister," he said "My understanding is far from complete "

"At this point I would be glad of scraps I only know that Princess Teiko is in difficulty—"

He corrected me instantly. "It is her son Takahito that concerns my sister most. She always thinks of him first."

I didn't like the direction this conversation was taking "Is Takahito unwell?"

"He is healthy," Kanemore said. "And still his half-brother's heir, at present "

That was far too ominous "Kanemore-san, it was my understanding that the late Emperor only allowed the current Emperor to ascend on the condition that Takahito be named heir after him, and that Takahito in turn take his royal grandfather's name, Sanjo, upon his eventual ascent Is Emperor Reizei thinking of defying his father's wishes?"

Kanemore looked uncomfortable "There have been complications Plus, the Fujiwara favor another candidate, Prince Norihira He is considered more agreeable I will say no more at present."

More agreeable because, unlike Princess Teiko, Norihira's mother was Fujiwara. I considered this If the Fujiwara Clan supported another candidate, then this was bad news for Teiko's son As the Taira and Minamoto and other military families were the might of the Emperor, so were the Fujiwara his administration Court ministers and minor officials alike were drawn primarily from their ranks All power was the Emperor's in theory, but in practice his role was mostly ceremonial. It was the Fujiwara who kept the government in motion.

Still, the politics of the Imperial Court and the machinations of the Fujiwara were both subjects I had happily abandoned years ago. Now it appeared that I needed to renew my understanding, and quickly. Despite my desire to question him further, I knew that Kanemore had said all he was going to say on the matter for now. I changed the subject.

"Did you see much fighting while you were in the north?"

"A bit," he admitted "The Abe Clan is contained, but not yet defeated ..." he trailed off, then stopped and turned toward me. "Goji-san, are you a seer in addition to your other rumored talents? How did you know I had been in the north?"

I tried to keep from smiling. "That scar on your jaw is from a blade and fairly new Even if you were inclined to brawling—which I seriously doubt—I don't believe the average drunken samurai could so much as touch you That leaves the northern campaigns as the only reasonable conclusion It was an educated guess No more "

He rubbed his scar thoughtfully "Impressive, even so. But the hour grows late and I think we should be on our way."

We had taken no more than a few steps when two *hushi* staggered out of a nearby drinking establishment One collided with me and muttered a slurred curse and reached for his sword I didn't give the fool time to draw it. I struck him with my open palm square on the chin and his head snapped back and collided with a very hard lintel post Fortunately for him, since Kanemore's *tachi* was already clear of its scabbard and poised for the blow swordsmen liked to call "the pear splitter," because that's what the victim's bisected head would resemble once the blow was completed I have no doubt that Kanemore would have demonstrated this classic technique on that drunken lout had I not been in the path of his sword The drunk's equally inebriated companion had his own sword half-drawn, but took a long look at Kanemore and thought better of it. He sheathed his sword, bowed in a rather grudging apology, and helped his addled friend to his feet. Together they staggered off into the night

Kanemore watched them disappear before he put his sword away "That, too, was impressive But pointless. You should have let me kill him One less provincial thug swaggering about the city Who would miss him?"

I sighed "His lord, for a start. Who would demand an explanation and the man's companion would say one thing and we would say another and justice ministers would become involved and there would be time spent away from the matter at hand that I don't think we can afford Or am I mistaken?"

Kanemore smiled "I must again concede that you are not. I'm beginning to see why my honored sister has summoned you. May your lack of error continue, for all our sakes "

The South Gate to the Imperial compound was closest, but Kanemore led me to the East Gate, which was guarded by bushi in the red and black Taira colors, one of whom I recognized as the messenger's other escort They stood aside for Kanemore and no questions were asked

We weren't going to the palace proper The Imperial Compound covered a large area in the city and there were many smaller buildings of various function spread out through the grounds, including houses for the Emperor's wives and favorites Considering our destination, it was clear we needed to attract as little attention as possible, Kanemore led me through some of the more obscure garden paths At least, they had been obscure to other people I remembered most of them from my time at Court Losing access to the gardens was one of two regrets I had about leaving the Court

Princess Teiko was the other

Kanemore escorted me to a fine, large house A small palace, actually, and quite suitable for the widow of an Emperor. A group of very well-dressed and important-looking visitors was leaving as we arrived, and we stepped aside on the walkway to let them pass. There was only one I recognized in the lamplight before I kneeled as courtesy demanded Fujiwara no Sentaro It seemed only fitting—my one visit to the compound in close to fifteen years and I would encounter my least favorite person at the Imperial Court The coldness of Kanemore's demeanor as they walked by wasn't exactly lost on me either

If Sentaro recognized me, he gave no sign Possibly he'd have forgotten me by now, but then a good politician did not forget an enemy while the enemy still drew breath

"I gather Lord Sentaro is not in your favor?" I asked after they had gone

"To call him a pig would be an insult to pigs," Kanemore said bluntly "But he is the Minister of Justice, a skilled administrator, and has our Emperor's confidence. The gods may decree that he becomes Chancellor after Lord Yorimichi, as luck seems to favor the man My sister, for some reason I cannot fathom, bears his company from time to time."

I started to say something about the realities of court life, but thought better of it While the saints teach us that life is an illusion, Sentaro's presence indicated that, sadly, some aspects of life did not change, illusion or not. We climbed the steps to the veranda

"Teiko-hime is expecting us," Kanemore said to the bushi flanking the doorway, but clearly they already knew that and stepped back as we approached. A servant girl pulled the screen aside, and we stepped into a large open room, impeccably furnished with bright silk cushions and flowers in artful arrangements and lit by several paper lanterns There was a dais on the far wall, curtained off, and doubtless a sliding screen behind it that would allow someone to enter the room without being seen. I had hoped to at least get a glimpse of Teiko, but of course that wasn't proper I knew the rules,

A group of very well-dressed and important-looking visitors was leaving as we arrived, and we stepped aside on the walkway to let them pass.

even if I didn't always follow them. Kanemore kneeled on a cushion near the dais, and I followed his example.

"My sister has been informed—" he started to say, but didn't get to finish.

"Your older sister is here, Kanemore-kun."

Two more maids impeccably dressed in layered yellow and blue *kimonos* entered the room and pulled back the curtain. A veil remained in front of the dais, translucent but not fully transparent. I could see the ghostly form of a woman kneeling there, her long black hair down loose and flowing over her shoulders. I didn't need to see her clearly to know it was the same woman who had brought the message to me in the courtyard and whose face I had not seen then, either. No need—the way she moved, the elegance of a gesture, both betrayed her. Now I heard Teiko's voice again, and that was more than enough.

Kanemore and I both bowed low.

There was silence, and then that beautiful voice again, chiding me. "A *donkey*, Lord Yamada? Honestly . ." I tried not to smile, but it was hard. "My poetry is somewhat . . . untrained, Teiko-hime."

"Teiko. Please. We are old friends."

At this Kanemore gave me a hard glance, but I ignored him. He was no longer the most dangerous person in my vicinity, and I needed all my attention for the one who was.

"I think there is something you wish to discuss with me," I said. "Is this possible?" It was the most polite way I knew to phrase the question, but Teiko waved it aside.

"There is no one within hearing," she said, "who has not already heard. You may speak plainly, Lord Yamada. I will do the same—I need your help."

"You have read my answer," I said.

"True, but you have not heard my trouble." Teiko said, softly. "Listen, and then tell me what you will or will not do. Now then—do you remember a young Fujiwara named Kiyoshi?"

That was a name I had not heard in a long time. Kiyoshi was about my age when I came to the Court as a very minor official of the household. Since he was handsome, bright, and a Fujiwara, his destiny seemed fixed. Like Kanemore he chose the *bushi* path instead and died fighting the northern barbarians. He was one of the few of that clan I could tolerate, and I sincerely mourned his death.

"I do remember him," I said.

"There is a rumor going around the Court that Kiyoshi was my lover, and that my son Takahito is his issue, not my late husband's."

For a moment I could not speak. This matter was beyond serious. Gossip was close to the rule of law at Court. If this particular gossip was not silenced, both Takahito's and Teiko's positions at Court were in peril, and that was just for a start.

"Do you know who is responsible for the slander?"

"No. While it's true that Kiyoshi was very dear to me, we grew up together at Court and our affections to each other were as brother and sister, as was well understood at the time. You know this to be true."

I did. If I knew anything. "And you wish for me to discover the culprit? That will be . . . difficult."

She laughed softly then, decorously covering her face with her fan even through the veils prevented me from seeing her face clearly. "Lord Yamada, even if I knew who started the rumors it would do little good. People repeat the gossip without even knowing who they heard it from. What I require now is tangible and very public proof that the rumors are false."

I considered. "I think that will be difficult as well. The only one who could swear to your innocence died fifteen years ago. Or am I to pursue his ghost?"

She laughed again. The sound was enchanting, but then everything about her was enchanting to me. There was a reason Princess Teiko was the most dangerous person in that room. I found myself feeling grateful that the screen was in place as I forced myself to concentrate on the business at hand.

"Nothing so distasteful," she said. "Besides, Kiyoshi died in loving service to my husband the late Emperor, and on the path he himself chose. If he left a ghost behind I would be quite surprised. No, Lord Yamada. Kiyoshi left something far more reliable—a letter. He sent it to me when he was in the north, just before ... his final battle. It was intended for his favorite and was accompanied by a second letter for me."

I frowned. "Why didn't he send this letter to the lady directly?"

She sighed then. "Lord Yamada, are you a donkey after all? He couldn't very well do so without compromising her. My friendship with Kiyoshi was well known; no one would think twice if I received a letter from him, in those days. In his favorite's case the situation was quite different. You know the penalty for a Lady of the Court who takes a lover openly."

I bowed again. I did know, and vividly. Banishment, or worse. Yet for someone born for the Court and knowing no other life, there probably was nothing worse. "Then clearly we need to acquire this letter. If it still exists, I imagine the lady in question will be reluctant to part with it."

"The letter was never delivered to her." Teiko raised her hand to silence me before I even began. "Do not think so ill of me, Lord Yamada. News of Kiyoshi's death reached us months before his letter did. By then my husband had given the wretched girl in marriage to the *daimyo* of a western province as reward for some service or other, so her romantic history is no longer at issue. Since Kiyoshi's letter was not intended for me I never opened it. I should have destroyed it. I know, but I could not."

"Perhaps foolish, but potentially fortunate. Yet I presume there is a problem still or I would not be here."

"The letter is missing, Lord Yamada. Without it I have no hope of saving my reputation and my son's future from the crush of gossip."

I let out a breath. "When did you notice the letter was stolen?"

"Lord Sentaro says it disappeared three days ago."

Now I really didn't understand and, judging from the grunt to my immediate right, neither did Kanemore. "What has Lord Sentaro to do with this?"

"He is the Emperor's Minister of Justice. In order to clear my reputation, I had to let him know of the letter's existence and arrange a time for the letter to be read and witnessed. He asked that it be given to him for safekeeping. Since he is also Kiyoshi's uncle I could not very well refuse."

She said it so calmly, and yet she had just admitted cutting her own throat. "Teiko-hime, as much as this pains me to say, the letter has surely been destroyed."

There was nothing but silence on the other side of the veil for several seconds, then she simply asked, "Oh? What makes you think so?"

I glanced at Kanemore, but there was no help from that direction. He looked as confused as I felt.

"Your pardon, Highness, but it's my understanding that the Fujiwara have their own candidate for the throne. As a member of that family, it is in Lord Sentaro's interest that the letter never resurface."

"Lord Sentaro is perhaps overly ambitious," Teiko said, and there was a more than hint of winter ice in her voice. "But he is also an honorable man. He was just here to acquaint me with the progress of the search. I believe him when he says the letter was stolen, I have less confidence in his ability to recover it. Lord Yamada, will you help me or not?"

I bowed again and made the only answer I could. "If it lies within my power, I will find that letter for you."

"That," said Kanemore later after we passed through the eastern gate, "was very strange."

The man, besides his martial prowess, had quite a gift for understatement. "You didn't know about the letter?"

"Teiko never mentioned it before, though it doesn't surprise me. Yet

"The business with the Minister of Justice does surprise you, yes?"

He looked at me. "Since my sister trusts you I will speak plainly—Lord Sentaro is Chancellor Yorimichi's primary agent in the Fujiwara opposition to Takahito. If I had been in Lord Sentaro's place I would

have destroyed that letter the moment it fell into my hands and danced a tribute to the gods of luck while it burned."

I rubbed my chin. "Yet Teiko-hime is convinced that the letter was not destroyed."

Kanemore grunted again. "Over the years I've gone where my Emperor and his government have required. My sister, on the other hand, knows no world other than the Imperial Court. If Teiko were a *kot*, the Court would be her pond, if you take my meaning. So why would something that is immediately obvious to us both be so unclear to her?"

"Perhaps we're the ones who aren't clear," I said. "Let's assume for the moment that your sister is right and that the letter was simply stolen. That would mean that Lord Sentaro had a good reason for not destroying it in the first place."

"That makes sense. Yet I'm having some difficulty imagining that reason." Kanemore admitted.

"As am I."

I looked around. Our path paralleled the river Kamo for a time, then turned southwest. Despite the lateness of the hour there were a few people on the road, apparently all in a hurry to reach their destinations. Demons were about at this time of night, and everyone's hurry and wariness was understandable. Kanemore and I were the only ones walking at a normal pace by the light of the setting moon.

"Your escort duties must be over by now and, as I'm sure you know, I'm used to moving about the city on my own," I said.

Kanemore looked a little uncomfortable. "It was Teiko's request. I know you can take care of yourself under most circumstances," he said, and it almost sounded like a compliment. "But if someone did steal the letter, they obviously would not want it found, and your audience with my sister will not be a secret. Sentaro himself saw you, for one."

"I didn't think he recognized me."

"I would not depend on that." Kanemore said drily. "The man forgets nothing. His enemies, doubly so."

"You flatter me. I was no threat to him, no matter how I might have wished otherwise."

"Why did you resign your position and leave the Court? If I may be so impolite as to ask. It could not have been easy to secure the appointment in the first place."

I had no doubt he'd already heard the story from Teiko, but I didn't mind repeating events as I remembered them.

"Your sister was kind to me, in those early days. Of course there would be those at Court who chose to misinterpret her interest. I had become a potential embarrassment to Princess Teiko, as Lord Sentaro delighted in making known to me."

"Meaning he would have made certain of it," Kanemore said. "I wondered."

I shrugged. "I made my choice. Destiny is neither cruel nor kind. So Kanemore-san, I've answered a personal question of yours. Now I must ask one of you: What are you afraid of?"

"Death," he said immediately. "I've never let that fear prevent me from doing what I must, but the fear remains."

"That just means you're not a fool, which I already knew. So, you fear death. Do you fear things that are already dead?"

"No ... well, not especially," he said, though he didn't sound completely convincing or convinced. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I'm going to need help. If the letter is in the Imperial Compound, it's beyond even your reach. Searching would be both dangerous and time-consuming."

"Certainly," Kanemore agreed. "Yet what's the alternative?"

"The 'help' I spoke of. We're going to need several measures of uncooked rice."

He frowned. "I know where such can be had. Are you hungry?"

"No. But I can assure you that my informant is."

About an hour later we passed through Rashamon, the southwest gate. There was no one about at this hour. The southwest exit of the city, like the northeast, was not a fortunate direction, as the priests often said these were the directions from which both demons and trouble in general could enter the city. I sometimes wondered why anyone bothered to build gates at such places, since it seemed to be asking for trouble, yet I supposed the demands of roads and travelers outweighed the risks. Even so, the most hardened *bushi* would not accept a night watch at the Rasha Gate.

The bridge I sought was part of a ruined family compound just outside the city proper, now marked by a broken-down wall and the remnants of a garden. In another place I would have thought this the aftermath of a war, but not here. Still, death often led to the abandonment of a home, no doubt this family had transferred their fortunes elsewhere and allowed this place to go to ruin. Wasteful, but not unusual.

The compound was still in darkness, but there was a glow in the east, dawn was coming. I hurried through the ruins while Kanemore kept pace with me, his hand on his sword. There were vines growing on the stone bridge on the far side of the garden, but it was still intact and passable, giving an easy path over the wide stream beneath it. Not that crossing the stream was the issue. I pulled out one of the small bags of uncooked rice that Kanemore had supplied and opened it to let the scent drift freely on the night breezes.

The red lantern appeared almost instantly. It floated over the curve of the bridge as if carried by someone invisible, but that wasn't really the case—the lantern carried itself. Its one glowing eye opened, and then its mouth.

I hadn't spoken to the ghost in some time, and perhaps I was misremembering, but it seemed much bigger than it had been on our first meeting. Still, that wasn't what caught my immediate attention. It was the long, pointed teeth.

Seita did not have teeth—

"Lord Yamada, drop!"

I didn't question or hesitate but threw myself flat on the ground just as the lantern surged forward and its mouth changed into a gaping maw. A shadow loomed over me and then there was a flash of silver in the poor light. The lantern shrieked and then dissolved in a flare of light as if burning to ashes from within. I looked up to see the neatly sliced-open corpse of a youkai lying a few feet away from me. The thing was ugly, even for a monster. A full eight feet tall and most of that consisting of mouth. The thing already stank like a cesspit, and in another moment it dissolved into black sludge and then vanished. I saw what looked like a scrap of paper fluttering on a weed before it blew away into the darkness.

Where did the creature go?

I didn't have time to ponder; another lantern appeared on the bridge and Kanemore made ready, but I got to my feet quickly. "Stop. It's all right."

And so it was. Seita came gliding over the bridge, with his one eye cautiously watching the pair of us. Now I recognized the tear in the paper near his base and his generally tatty appearance, things that had been missing from the imposter's disguise.

"Thank you for ridding me of that unpleasant fellow," he said, "but don't think for a moment that will warrant a discount."

Kanemore just stared at the ghost for a moment, then glanced at me, but I indicated silence. "Seita-san, you at least owe me an explanation for allowing your patron to walk into an ambush. How long has that thing been here?"

I think Seita tried to shrug, but that's hard to do when your usual manifestation is a red paper lantern with one eye and one mouth and no arms, legs, or shoulders. "A day or so. Damned impertinent of it to usurp my bridge, but it was strong and I couldn't make it leave. I think it was waiting on someone. You, perhaps?"

"Perhaps? Almost certainly, yet that doesn't concern me now. I need your services."

"So I assumed," said the lantern. "What do you want to know?"

"A letter was stolen from the Imperial Compound three days ago. I need to know who took it and where that letter is now. It bears the scent of Fujiwara no Kiyoshi, among others."

Kanemore could remain silent no more. He leaned close and whispered, "Can this thing be trusted?"

"That thing' remark raises the price." Seita said. "Four bowls."

"I apologize on behalf of my companion. Two now." I countered. "Two more when the information is delivered. Bring the answer by tomorrow night and I'll add an extra bowl."

The lantern grinned very broadly. "Then you can produce five bowls of uncooked rice right now. I have your answer."

That surprised me. I'd expected at least a day's delay. "Seita-san, I know you're good or I wouldn't have come to you first, but how could you possibly know about the letter already? Were the rei involved?"

He looked a little insulted. "Lord Yamada, we ghosts have higher concerns than petty theft. This was the work of *shikigami*. The fact that they were about in the first place caught my attention, but I do not know who sent them. That is a separate question and won't be answered so quickly or easily."

"Time is short. I'll settle for the location of the letter."

Seita gave us directions to where the letter was hidden. We left the nice in small bags, with chopsticks thrust upright through the openings as proper for an offering to the dead. I offered a quick prayer for Seita's soul, but we didn't stay to watch; I'd seen the ghost consume an offering before and it was . . . unsettling.

"Can that thing be trusted?" Kanemore repeated when we were out of earshot of the bridge, "and what is this *shikigami* it was referring to?"

"As for trusting Seita, we shall soon know. That thing you killed at the bridge was a *shikigami*, and it's very strange to encounter one here. Thank you, by the way. I owe you my life."

Kanemore grunted. "My duty served, though you are quite welcome. Still, you make deals with ghosts, and encountering a simple monster is strange?"

"A *shikigami* is not a monster, simple or otherwise. A youkai is its own creature and has its own volition, nasty and evil though that may be. A *shikigami* is a created thing; it has no will of its own, only that of the one who created it."

He frowned. "Are you speaking of sorcery?"

"Yes," I said. "And of a high order. I should have realized when the thing disappeared. A monster or demon is a physical creature and, when slain, leaves a corpse like you or I would. A shikigami almost literally has no separate existence. When its purpose is served or its physical form too badly damaged, it simply disappears. At most it might leave a scrap of paper or some element of what was used to create it."

"So one of these artificial servants acquired the letter and hid it in the Rasha Gate. Fortunate, since that's on our way back into the city."

"Very fortunate."

Kanemore glanced at me. "You seem troubled. Do you doubt the ghost's information?"

"Say rather I'm pondering something I don't understand. There were rumors that Lord Sentaro dabbled in Chinese magic, even when I was at Court. Yet why would he choose *shikigami* to spirit the letter away? It was in his possession to begin with, removing it and making that removal seem like theft would be simple enough to arrange without resorting to such means."

Kanemore shrugged. "I've heard these rumors as well, but I gave them no credence. Even so, it is the letter that concerns me, not the workings of Lord Sentaro's twisted mind."

Concentrating on the matter at hand seemed a very sensible suggestion, and I abandoned my musings as we approached the deserted Rasha Gate. At least, it had seemed deserted when we passed through it earlier that evening. I was not so certain of that now. I rather regretted having to leave my sword behind for my audience with Teiko-hime, but I still had my dagger, and I made certain it was loose in its sheath.

The gate structure loomed above us. We checked around the base as far as we could but found no obvious hiding places. Now and then I heard a faint rustle, like someone winding and unwinding a scroll. Kanemore was testing the looseness of a stone on the west side of the gate. I motioned him to be still and listened more closely. After a few moments the sound came again.

From above.

This time Kanemore heard it, too. He put his sword aside in favor of his own long dagger, which he clenched in his teeth like a Chinese pirate as he climbed the wooden beams and cross-bars that supported the gate. I quickly followed his example, or as quickly as I could manage. Kanemore climbed like a monkey, whereas I was not quite so nimble. Still, I was only a few seconds behind him when he reached the gap between the gate frame and the elaborate roof.

"Goju-san, they are here!"

I didn't have to ask who "they" were. The first of the *shikigami* plummeted past, missing me by inches before it dissolved. If the body survived long enough to strike the flagstones, I never heard it, but then I wasn't listening. I hauled myself over the top beam and landed in a crouch.

I needn't have bothered; the gap under the roof was quite tall enough for me to stand. Kanemore had two other lumbering *shikigami* at bay, but a third moved to attack him from the rear. It was different from the other two. Snakelike, it slithered across the floor, fangs bared and its one yellow eye fixed on Kanemore's naked heel.

I was too far away.

"Behind you!"

I threw myself forward and buried my dagger in the creature near the tip of its tail, which was all I could reach. Even there the thing was as thick as my arm, but I felt the dagger pierce the tail completely and bury its tip in the wood beneath it. My attack barely slowed the creature; there was a sound like the tearing of paper as it ripped itself loose from my blade to get at Kanemore.

Kanemore glanced behind him and to my surprise took one step backward. Just as the creature's fangs reached for him he very swiftly lifted his left foot, pointed the heel, and thrust it down on the creature's neck just behind the head. There was a snap like the breaking of a green twig and the serpent began to dissolve. In that instant the other two *shikigami* seized the chance and attacked, like their companion, in utter silence.

"Look out!"

I could have saved my breath. Kanemore's dagger blade was already a blur of motion, criss-crossing the space in front of him like a swarm of wasps. Even if the other two creatures intended to scream they had no time before they, too, dissolved into the oblivion from whence they came. Kanemore was barely breathing hard.

"Remind me to never fight on any side of a battle, Kanemore-sensei," I said as I got back off the floor.

"One doesn't always get to choose one's battles," Kanemore said drily. "In any case it seems you've returned the favor for my earlier rescue, so we my call our accounts settled in that regard."

I picked up a ragged bit of mulberry paper, apparently all that remained of our recent foes. There were a few carefully printed *kanji*, but they were faded and impossible to read. "Fine quality. These servitors were expensive."

"And futile, if we assume they were guarding something of value."

It didn't take long to find what we were searching for; I located a small pottery jar hidden in a mortise on one of the beams and broke it open with my dagger hilt. A scroll lay within. It was tied with silk strings and the strings' ends in turn were pressed together and sealed with beeswax impressed with the Fujiwara *mon*. I examined it closely as Kanemore looked on.

"Your sister will have to confirm this," I said at last, "but this does appear to be the missing letter."

The relief on the man's face was almost painful to see. "And now I am in your debt again, Lord Yamada. It has been a long night and we are both weary, yet I do not think that this can wait. Let us return to the palace now; it will be stirring by the time we arrive."

The lack of sleep plus the sudden stress of the fight, now relieved, had left me feeling as wrung out as a washerwoman's towel. I knew Kanemore must have been nearly as bad off, even though from his stoic demeanor I'd have thought he could take on another half-dozen *shikigami* without breaking a sweat.

"We'll go directly," I said, "but I'm going to need a breath or two before I try that climb again. You could do with some rest yourself."

He nodded and only then allowed himself to sit down in that now empty place. "I am too tired to argue, so you must be right."

We greeted the dawn like two roof dragons from the top of the Rasha Gate and then made our way back into the city. The Imperial Compound was already alive with activity by then, but Kanemore didn't bother with circuitous routes. We proceeded directly to Teiko-hime's manor and at the fastest speed decorum allowed. We probably attracted more attention than we wanted to, but Kanemore was in no mood for more delays.

Neither was I, truth to tell, but Teiko-hime had not yet risen, and I had to wait on the veranda while Kanemore acquainted his sister with the news. I waited. And I waited. I was starting to feel a little insulted by the time Kanemore finally reappeared. But he did not come from the house, he came hurrying through the garden path, and his face—well, I hope I never see that expression again on a human being.

"I am truly sorry ... to have kept you waiting, Lord Yamada. This ... I was to give you this."

"This" was a heavy pouch of quilted silk. Inside were half a dozen small cylinders of pure gold. I take pride in the fact that I only stared at them for a moment or two.

"Kanemore-san, what has happened?"

"I cannot."

"I think you can. I think I will have to insist."

His eyes did recover a little of their old fire then, but it quickly died away. "My sister was adamant that we deal with the matter at once. I escorted her to the Ministry of Justice as she insisted. I guess the burden of waiting had been too much, she did not even give me time to fetch you ... oh, how could she be so reckless?"

"Surely there is—"

"Nothing, Goji-san. In our ignorance we have done more than enough. The writ is sealed."

He left me there to find my own way out of the compound. It was a long time before I bothered to try.

It took longer to settle my affairs in Kyoto than I'd hoped, but the gold meant that the matter would be merely difficult, not impossible. The Widow Tamahara was, perhaps, one of the very few people genuinely sorry to see me leave. I sold what remained of my belongings and kept only what I could carry, along with my new traveling clothes, my sword, and the balance of the gold which was still quite substantial.

On the appointed day, I was ready. Teiko's party emerged from the eastern gate of the compound through the entrance still guarded by the Taira. Yet bushi of the Minamoto Clan formed the bulk of her escort. Kanemore was with them, as I knew he would be. His eyes were sad but he held his head high.

Normally a lady of Teiko's birth would have traveled in a covered ox cart, hidden from curious eyes, but now she walked, wearing the plain traveling clothes that she'd used to bring that first message in disguise, completing her disgrace. Still, I'd recognized her then as I did now. When the somber procession had moved a discreet distance down the road, I fell in behind, just another traveler on the northern road.

I was a little surprised when the party took the northeast road toward Lake Biwa, but I was able to learn from an attendant that Teiko wished to make a pilgrimage to the sacred lake before beginning her new life at Suma. Since it was only slightly out of the way, her escort had seen no reason to object. Neither did I, for that matter.

"If killing you would atone for my own foolishness," Kanemore said, "I'd do it in a heartbeat."

I felt my spirit grow cold, and my own voice sounded lifeless in my ears. "The letter was read at the Ministry? Without knowing its contents?"

"Normally these matters take weeks, but considering what had happened to the letter under his care, Lord Sentaro couldn't very well refuse Teiko's demand for an audience. I must say in his favor that he tried to dissuade her, but she insisted he read it before the Court. We all heard, we all saw ..."

I put my hands on his shoulders, but I'm not even sure he noticed. "Kanemore?"

He did look at me then, and he recited a poem.

"The Wisteria pines
alone in desolation.
without the bright Peony."

I could hardly believe what I was hearing. Three lines of an incomplete *tanka*. Like the three that Teiko had used to draw me back to court, these three in turn had damned her. Wisteria was of course a reference to the Fujiwara family crest, and "Peony" had been Teiko's nickname at Court since the age of seven. Clearly the poem had been hers to complete and return to Kiyoshi. The imagery and tone were clear, too. There was no one who could hear those words and doubt that Kiyoshi and Teiko had been lovers. For any woman at Court it would have been indiscreet; for an Imperial Wife it amounted to treason.

"What is to be done?" I asked.

"My sister is stripped of her titles and all Court honors. She will be confined and then banished . ." and here Kanemore's strength failed him, and it was several heartbeats before he could finish. "Exiled. To the northern coast at Suma."

Say, rather, to the ends of the earth. It was little short of an execution.

ter, since I was determined to follow regardless. The mountains surrounding the lake slowed the procession's progress and it took three days to get there. When the party made camp on the evening of the third day, I did the same nearby.

I wasn't terribly surprised to find Kanemore looming over me and my small fire within a very short time.

"I was just making tea, Kanemore-san. Would you care for some?"

He didn't meet my gaze. "My sister has instructed me to tell you to go home."

"I have no home."

"In which case I am instructed to tell you to go someplace else. I should warn you that, should you reply that where you are now is someplace else,' she has requested that I beat you senseless, but with affection."

I nodded. "Anticipated my response. That's the Teiko I always knew. So. Are you also instructed to kill me if I refuse your sister's order?"

Now he did look me squarely in the eye. "If killing you would atone for my own foolishness," Kanemore said, "I'd do it in a heartbeat. Yet I cannot blame you for what happened; try as I might. You only did as my sister bid—"

"As did you," I pointed out.

He managed a weak smile. "Even so, we still share some of the responsibility for what happened. I could not prevent her disgrace, so I am determined to share it."

"That is my wish as well," I said.

"You have no—" he began but did not finish.

"Exactly. My failure gives me that right, if nothing else does. Now consider: what about Prince Takahito? Your nephew? Where is he?"

"At Court. Takahito of course asked to accompany his mother, but permission was refused."

"Indeed. And now he remains at Court surrounded by his enemies. Who will look after him?"

"Do not lecture me on my duties! Who then, shall look after my sister? These men are to escort her to Suma. They will not remain and protect her afterward."

I waved that aside. "I well understand the burden of conflicting obligations. Your instinct for love and loyalty is to protect both your sister and her son. How will you accomplish this when they are practically on opposite ends of the earth? Which path would Teiko choose for you?"

His face reddened slightly, I could tell that the subject had already come up. Repeatedly, if I knew Teiko.

"We've spoken our minds plainly to each other in the past, Kanemore-san, and I will do the same now: your sister is going to a place where life is harsh and she will be forced to make her own way. Despite her great gifts, neither she nor her two charming and loyal attendants have the vaguest idea of how to survive outside the shelter of the Imperial Court. I do."

Kanemore didn't say anything for several long moments. "My sister is the daughter of an Emperor. She was born to be the mother of an Emperor," he said finally.

"If that were the case, then it would still be so," I said. "Life does not always meet our expectations, but that should not prevent us from seeking what happiness we can."

"You are unworthy of Princess Teiko," Kanemore said, expressionless, "and I say that as someone who holds you in high regard. Yet you are also right. For what little it may be worth, I will speak to my sister."

"When I finish my tea," I said, "and with your sister's permission, so will I."

Teiko agreed to see me, perhaps because she saw no good way to prevent it. After fifteen years I did not care what her reasons might be. The fact that she did agree was enough.

I found her sitting by herself in a small clearing. She gazed out at a lovely view of Lake Biwa beyond her. The sun had dipped just below the mountains ringing the lake and the water had turned a deep azure. Teiko's escort was present but out of earshot, as were both of her attendants. She held an empty teacup, the rice cakes beside her looked hardly touched. She still wore her *boshi*, but the veil was pulled back now to reveal her face. It was a gift, I knew, and I was grateful.

I can't say that she hadn't changed at all in fifteen years: there might have been one or two gray strands among the glossy black of her hair, perhaps a line or two on her face. I can say that the changes didn't matter. She was and remained beautiful. She looked up and smiled at me a little wistfully as I kneeled not quite in front of her but a little to the side, so as not to spoil her view.

"So. Have you come to lecture me on my recklessness as well? Please yourself, but be warned—my brother has worned the topic to exhaustion."

"Your brother thinks only of you. Yet what's done cannot be undone."

"Life is uncertain in all regards," Teiko said very seriously, then she managed a smile and waved a hand at the vast stretch of water nearby. "An appropriate setting, don't you think? I must look like a fisherman's wife now. What shall I do at Suma, Lord Yamada? Go bare-breasted like the abalone maidens and dive for shells? Learn to gather seaweed to make salt, like those two lovers of the exiled poet? Can you imagine me, hair loose and legs bared, gleaning the shore?"

"I can easily so imagine," I said.

She sighed. "Then your imagination is better than mine. I am a worthless creature now."

"That is not possible."

She smiled at me. There were dimples in her cheeks. "You are kind, Goji-san. I'm glad that the years have not changed this about you."

She offered me a cup of tea from the small pot nearby, but I declined. She poured herself another while I pondered yet again the best way to frame one of the questions that had been troubling me. I finally decided that there simply was no good way, if I chose to ask.

"No lectures, Teiko-hime, but I must ask about the letter."

Her expression was unreadable. "Just 'Teiko,' please. Especially now. So. You're curious about Kiyoshi's letter, of course. That poem was unexpected."

"You weren't Kiyoshi's lover," I said.

Teiko smiled a little wistfully. "You know I was not," she said. "But at the moment there is no explanation I can offer you."

"I'm not asking for one. What's done is done."

She sipped her tea. "Many things have been done, Goji-san. There is more to come, whatever our place in the order of events may be. Speaking of which, my brother in his own delicate way hints that there is another matter you wish to speak to me about."

"I am going to Suma," I said.

"That is noble, but pointless. Your life is in Kyoto."

"My life is as and where it is fated to be, but still I am going to Suma," I repeated. "Do you require me to say why?"

She actually blushed then, but it did not last. "You say that what's done cannot be undone. Perhaps that is true, but you do not yet know all that has been done. As at our last meeting, I must ask you to listen to me, and then decide what you will or will not do. Please?"

"I am listening."

"You left Court because people were starting to talk about us."

"Yes. When the Emperor bestowed his favor on you, Lord Sentaro—"

"Did no more or less than what I asked him to do."

For a little while I forgot to breathe. I idly wondered, somewhere above the roar in my ears, whether I ever would again. "What you.. ?"

"It's unforgivable, I know, but I was not much more than a child, and both foolish and afraid. Once I had been chosen by the former Emperor there could be nothing between us nor even the rumor of such. I knew that you would do what you did, to protect my reputation."

"I would have done anything," I said, "if you had asked me."

"That is the true shame. I have borne these past fifteen years," Teiko said softly. "I let this person you detest be the one to break your heart because I lacked the courage to do it myself. I heard later that he took undue pleasure in this. I must bear the blame for that also."

Fifteen years. I could feel the weight of every single one of them on my shoulders. "Why are you telling me this now?"

"Because I needed to tell you," she said. "More importantly, you needed to hear it, and know just how unworthy I am of your regard before you choose to throw your life away after mine. Or do you still wish to speak to me of things that cannot be undone?"

Perhaps it was a test. Perhaps it was a challenge. Perhaps it was the simple truth. I only knew what remained true for me. "My decision is not altered," I said. "I would like to know yours."

There were tears in her dark eyes now. "There are things we may not speak of, even now. If it is our fate to reach Suma together, speak to me then and I will answer you."

The demons were teasing me in my dreams. At least, so I believe. In a vision I saw myself and Teiko on the beach at Suma. The land was desolate but the sea was beautiful and it met most of our needs. We walked on its shore. Teiko was laughing. It was the most exquisite of sounds, at least until she started laughing at me and it wasn't Teiko at all but some ogress with Teiko's smile.

"What have you done with Teiko?" I demanded, but the demon just mocked me. I drew my sword but the blade was rusted and useless, it would not cut. I looked around frantically at the sea but there was nothing but gigantic waves, one after another racing toward the beach. Sailing against them was one small boat. I could see Teiko there, her back turned to me, sailing away. I ignored the demon and chased after her, but the sea drove me back again and again until her boat was swallowed by the attacking sea.

"—amada!"

Someone was calling me. The ogress? I did not care. Teiko was gone.

"Lord Yamada!"

I was shaken violently awake. Kanemore kneeled beside my blankets, looking frantic

"What-what's happened?" I said, trying to shake off the nightmare

"My sister is missing! Help us search!"

I was awake now "But .. how? Her guards worked in paired shifts!"

Kanemore looked disgusted as I scrambled to my feet "The fools swear they never took their eyes off of her, that Teiko and her maids were sleeping peacefully, and then suddenly Teiko wasn't there! Nonsense! They must have been playing Go or some such rot. I'll have their heads for this!"

"We'll need their heads to help us search. She could not have gotten far. Go ahead. I will catch up."

Kanemore ran through the camp with me not far behind, but when I came to the place where I knew Teiko and her ladies had been sleeping, I paused The two maidservants were huddled together looking confused and frightened, but I ignored them There was a small screen for some privacy, but no way Teiko could have left the spot without one of the guards seeing her I looked in and found her bedding undisturbed, but empty I pulled her coverlet aside and found a crumpled piece of paper

"She's up there!"

I heard Kanemore call to me from the shore of the lake and I raced to join him. Just a little farther down the shoreline was a place where the mountains dropped sheer to the water. On the very edge of that high promontory stood a small figure dressed in flowing white, as for a funeral

"Teiko, no!"

I started to shout a warning to Kanemore, but he was already sprinting ahead looking for the quickest route up the slope and I followed hot on his heels, but it was far too late In full sight of both of us, Teiko calmly stepped off the edge.

With her broad sleeves fluttering like the wings of a butterfly, one could almost imagine her fall would be softened, but the sound of her body striking the water carried across the lake like the crack of ice breaking on the Kamo River in spring.

One could also imagine, first hope having failed, that there would be nothing in the water to find except, perhaps, a few scraps of paper One tried very hard to hold on to this hope and only relented when the fishermen from a nearby village helped us locate and remove the cold, broken body of former Princess Teiko from the deep, dark waters of the sacred lake.

The moon was high again and cast its reflection on the river. The modest funeral rites for Teiko were well under way, and once more I stood on the Shijo Bridge, staring down at the moon and the dark water beneath it. Again I saw the *onibi* flare out on the water. I knew that, if I waited long enough, the ghost lights would be followed by the graceful spirits of women who had drowned themselves for love.

I had seen them before; they would soon appear just above the water in solemn procession, drifting a bit as if with the currents below. The legend was that men unfortunate enough to stare at them too closely would drown themselves out of love as well. I wondered if I, too, before I drowned myself in turn, might see one small figure with the face of Princess Teiko

I didn't know what Kanemore intended when he appeared beside me on the bridge. At that moment I did not care I simply gazed at the moon's reflection and waited for whatever might come.

He placed a small scroll on the railing in front of me "This is for you, Lord Yamada," he said formally

I frowned. "What is it?"

"A letter," he said. "From my sister I have already opened and read the one intended for me."

I didn't move or touch the letter "Meticulous She had this planned before we even left the capital. She never intended to go to Suma "

"The shame of her disgrace was too much to bear," he said. He sounded about as convinced as I was

"I rather doubt," I said, "that there was anything your sister could not bear, at need "

"Then why did she do it?" he asked softly

A simple question that covered so much, and yet at the moment I didn't have a clear answer I think I understood more of what had happened than Kanemore did, but the "why" of it all was as big a mystery to me as it was to him. I shared the one thing I thought I knew for certain

"I've only been able to think of one clear reason I have been drinking for the past day or so to see if I could perhaps forget that reason "

"Have you succeeded?"

"No."

He leaned against the rail with me Out on the water, the mists were forming into the likenesses of young women Kanemore glanced at them nervously "Then share that reason with me Preferably someplace else."

I smiled "You must drink with me then "

"If needs must then let's get to it."

I picked up Teiko's letter and we left the ghostly women behind From there we went to the Widow Tamahara's establishment, as it was the closest. Usually it was filled with drinking samuru, but for the moment all was quiet We found an unused table, and Kanemore ordered saké, which the smiling Widow Tamahara delivered personally Kanemore poured out two generous measures, and we drank in companionable silence until Kanemore could stand it no longer. "So. What is the answer you drink to forget?" he asked, as he topped off his cup and my own "Why did Teiko kill herself?"

"The only obvious and immediate answer is that, upon her death, you would be free to return to the capital and look after Takahito."

He frowned "But you were going to be with her."

I sighed deeply. "Which did not alter her plans in the slightest, as apparently I was not an acceptable alternative "

"That is a very sad thing to bear," he said after a while, "and also very odd. I know my sister was fond of you "

"Maybe And yet

"Yet what?"

I took a deep breath and then an even deeper drink. "And yet there is a voice deep in my brain that keeps shouting that I am a complete and utter ass, that I do not understand anything, and the reason Teiko killed herself had nothing to do with me. Try as I might, drink as I might, that troublesome fellow only shouts louder"

"You have suffered greatly because of my family," Kanemore said. "And I know that I have no right to ask more of you. Yet it was my sister's wish that you read her letter. Will you grant her last request?"

I didn't answer right away "I once asked what you were afraid of, Kanemore-san. I think it only fair to tell you what I am afraid of. I am very afraid of what Princess Teiko will say to me now "

Yet there was never really any question of refusing. I took out the letter. After hesitating as long as I dared I broke the seal In doing so I discovered that, when I feared the very worst, I had shown entirely too little imagination

And, yes, I was in fact a complete and utter ass

The letter was very short, and this is most of what it said.

"The crane flies above
The lake's clear shining surface.
White feathers glisten,
Made pure by sacred water,
As the poet's book was cleansed "

At the end of the poem she had simply written: "Forgive me—Teiko "

I thought, perhaps, if one day I was able to forgive myself, maybe then I would find the strength to forgive Teiko Not this day, but that didn't matter I had other business I put the letter away

"Kampai, Kanemore-san. Let us finish this jar of fine saké."

I knew Kanemore was deeply curious about the letter but too polite to ask, for which I was grateful. He hefted the container and frowned. "It is almost empty. I'll order another."

"No, my friend, for this is all we will drink tonight. From here we will visit the baths, and then go to sleep, for tomorrow our heads must be clear."

"Why? What happens tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow we restore your sister's honor."

The Imperial Court was composed more of tradition and ritual than people. Everything in its time, everything done precisely so. Yet it was astonishing to me how quickly matters could unfold, given the right impetus.

Kanemore kneeled beside me in the hall where justice, or at least Fujiwara no Sentaro's version of it, was dispensed. The Minister had not yet taken his place on the dais, but my attention was on a curtained alcove on the far side of the dais. I knew I had seen that curtain move. I leaned over and whispered to Kanemore.

"His Majesty Reizei is present, I hope?"

"I believe so, accompanied by Chancellor Yonmuchi, I expect. He will not show himself, of course."

Of course. The acknowledged presence of the Emperor in these proceedings was against form, but that didn't matter. He was here, and everyone knew it. I was almost certain he would be, once word reached him. Kanemore, through another relative in close attendance on His Majesty, made sure that word did so reach him. I think Lord Sentaro convened in such haste as a way to prevent that eventuality, but in this he was disappointed. He entered now, looking both grave and more than a little puzzled.

Kanemore leaned close. "I've sent a servant for a bucket of water, as you requested. I hope you know what you're doing."

Kanemore was obviously apprehensive. Under the circumstances I did not blame him. Yet I was perfectly calm. I claimed no measure of courage greater than Kanemore's; I simply had the distinct advantage that I no longer cared what happened to me.

"What is this matter you have brought before the Imperial Ministry?" Lord Sentaro demanded from the dais.

"I am here to remove the unjust stain on the honor of the late Princess Teiko, daughter of the Emperor Sanjo, Imperial Consort to the late Emperor Suzaku II," I said, clearly and with more than enough volume to carry my words throughout the room.

There was an immediate murmur of voices from the clerks, minor judges, members of the Court, and attendants present. Lord Sentaro glared for silence until the voices subsided.

"This unfortunate matter has already been settled. Lady Teiko was identified by my nephew, who died a hero's death in Mutsu province. Consider your words carefully, Lord Yamada."

"I choose my words with utmost care, Your Excellency. Your nephew was indeed a hero and brought honor to the Fujiwara family. He did not, however, name Princess Teiko as his lover. This I will prove."

Lord Sentaro motioned me closer, and when he leaned down his words were for me alone. "Shall I have cause to embarrass you a second time, Lord Yamada?"

Up until that point I almost felt sorry for the man, but no longer. Now my blade, so to speak, was drawn. "We shall soon see, Lord Minister of Justice. May I examine the letter?"

He indicated assent and I returned to my place as Lord Sentaro's stentorian voice boomed across the room. "Produce my nephew's letter so that Lord Yamada may examine it and see what everyone knows is plainly written there."

A few snickers blossomed like weeds here and there in the courtroom despite the seriousness of the proceedings, but I ignored them. A waiting clerk hurried up, bowed low, and handed me the letter in question. I unrolled it and then signaled Kanemore who in turn signaled someone waiting at the back of the room. A young man in Taira livery came hurrying up with a bucket of clear water, placed it beside me, and then withdrew.

Lord Sentaro frowned. "Lord Yamada, did you neglect to wash your face this morning?"

More laughter. I was examining the poem closely and did not bother to look up. "The water is indeed to wash away a stain, Lord Sentaro. Not, however, one of mine."

The letter was not very long, and mostly spoke of the things Kiyoshi had seen and the hardships of the camp. The poem actually came after his personal seal. I unrolled the letter in its entirety, no more than the length of my forearm, and carefully dipped the paper into the water.

There was consternation in the court. Two guards rushed forward, but one glare from Prince Kanemore made them hesitate, looking to Lord Sentaro for instruction.

"Lady Teiko's sin dishonors us all," Lord Sentaro said, and his voice was pure sweet reason, "but the letter has been witnessed by hundreds. Destroying it will change nothing."

"I am not destroying the letter, Lord Sentaro. I am merely cleansing it. As the poet Ono no Komachi did in our great-grandsires' time."

Too late the fool understood. A hundred years before, a Lady of the Court had been accused by an enemy of copying a poem from an old book and presenting the piece as her own work. She faced her accuser and washed the book in question in clear water, just as I was doing now, and with the same result. I held the letter up high for all to see. Kiyoshi's letter was, of course, perfectly intact.

Except for the poem. That was gone.

More consternation. Lord Sentaro looked as if someone had struck him between the eyes with a very large hammer. I didn't wait for him to recover.

"It is a sad thing," I said, again making certain my voice carried to every corner—and alcove—of the Court, "that a mere hundred years after the honored poet Ono no Komachi exposed this simple trick we should fall for it again. The ink in Fujiwara no Kiyoshi's letter is, of course, untouched, for it has been wedded to this paper for the past fifteen years. Clearly, the poem slandering Princess Teiko was added within the month."

"Are you accusing me—" Lord Sentaro stopped, but it was too late. He himself had made the association: I needed to do little else.

"I accuse no one. I merely state two self-evident facts: that Teikohime was innocent, and that whoever wrote the poem accusing her had both access to the letter," and here I paused for emphasis, "and access to a Fujiwara seal. These conclusions are beyond dispute, Excellency. At the present time the identity of the person responsible is of lesser concern."

The man was practically sputtering. "But .. but she was here! Why did Princess Teiko not speak up? She said nothing!"

I bowed low. "How should innocence answer a lie?"

The murmuring of the witnesses was nearly deafening for a time. It had only just begun to subside when a servant appeared from behind the alcove, hurried up to the dais, and whispered briefly in Lord Sentaro's ear. His face, before this slowly turning a bright pink, now turned ashen gray. Kanemore and I bowed to the Court as the official part of the proceedings were hastily declared closed. The proceedings that mattered most, I knew, had just begun.

That evening Kanemore found me once more on Shijo Bridge. The moon was beginning to wane, now past its full beauty, but I still watched its reflection in the water as I waited for the ghosts to appear. Kanemore approached and then leaned against the rail next to me.

"Well?" I asked.

"Teiko's honors and titles are to be posthumously restored," he said. "Lord Sentaro is, at his own expense and at Chancellor Yonmuchi's insistence, arranging prayers for her soul at every single temple in Kyoto."

"If you'll pardon my saying so, Kanemore-san, you don't sound happy about it."

"For the memory of my sister, I am," he said. "Yet one could also wish we had discovered this deception soon enough to save her. Still, I will have satisfaction against Lord Sentaro over this. Minister of Justice or no."

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I laughed. "No need. Even assuming that the expense of the prayers doesn't ruin him, Lord Sentaro will be digging clams at the beach at Suma or Akashi within a month, or I will be astonished." I said. "It's enough."

"Enough? It was his slander that killed my sister! Though I must ask while we're on the subject—how did you know?"

I had hoped to spare us both this additional pain, but clearly Kanemore wasn't going to be content with what he had. There was that much of his sister in him.

"Lord Sentaro did not kill your sister, Kanemore-san. We did."

One can never reliably predict a man's reaction to the truth. I thought it quite possible that Kanemore would take my head then and there. I'm not sure what was stopping him but, while he was still staring at me in shock, I recited the poem from his sister's letter. "I trust you get the allusion," I said when I was done.

From the stunned look on the poor man's face it was obvious that he did. "Teiko knew the poem was a forgery? Why didn't she—"

At that moment Kanemore's expression bore a striking resemblance to Lord Sentaro's earlier in the day. I nodded.

"You understand now. Teiko knew the poem was forged for the obvious reason that she did it herself. She used a carefully chosen ink that matched the original for color but was of poorer quality. I don't know how she acquired the proper seal, but I have no doubt that she did so. It's likely she started the original rumors as well, probably through her maids. We can confirm this, but I see no need."

Kanemore grasped for something, anything. "If Lord Sentaro thought the letter was genuine, that does explain why he didn't destroy it, but it does not explain why he didn't use it himself. Why didn't he accuse Teiko openly?"

"I have no doubt he meant to confront her in private if he'd had the chance, but in Court? Why should he? If Takahito was Kiyoshi's son, then the Emperor's heir was a Fujiwara after all, and with Teiko the Dowager Empress under Sentaro's thumb, thanks to that letter. Until that day came he could continue to champion Prince Norihira, but he won no matter who took the throne, or so the fool thought. Teiko was not mistaken when she said Sentaro was searching for the letter—he wanted it back as much as she did."

Kanemore, warrior that he was, continued to fight a lost battle. "Rubbish. Why would Teiko go to such lengths to deliberately dishonor herself?"

I met his gaze. "To make her son Emperor."

Despite my sympathy for Kanemore, I had come too far alone. Now he was going to share my burden whether he liked it or not. I gave him the rest.

"Consider this—so long as the Fujiwara preferred Prince Norihira, Takahito's position remained uncertain. Would the Teiko you knew resign herself to that if there was an alternative? Any alternative?"

Kanemore looked grim. "No. She would not."

I nodded. "Just so. Teiko gave Sentaro possession of the letter solely to show that he could have altered it. Then she likewise arranged for the letter to disappear and for us to find it again. In hindsight I realize that it had all been a little too easy, though not so easy as to arouse immediate suspicion. Those shikigami might very well have killed me if I'd been alone, but Teiko sent you to make certain that did not happen. Her attention to detail was really astounding."

Kanemore tried again. "But ... if this was her plan, then it worked perfectly! Lord Sentaro was humiliated before the Emperor, the Chancellor, the entire Court! His power is diminished! She didn't have to kill herself."

I almost laughed again. "Humiliated? Diminished? Why should Teiko risk so much and settle for so little? With the responsibility for her death laid solely at his feet, Lord Sentaro's power at Court has been broken. The entire Fujiwara clan has taken a blow that will be a long time healing. No one will oppose Prince Takahito's claim to the Throne now, or dare speak ill of your sister in or out of the Imperial Presence. It was Teiko's game, Kanemore-san. She chose the stakes."

Kanemore finally accepted defeat. "Even the shikigami ... Goji-san, I swear I did not know."

"I believe you. Teiko understood full well what would have happened if she'd confided in either of us. Yet we can both take comfort in this much—we did not fail your sister. We both performed exactly as she hoped."

Kanemore was silent for a time. When he spoke again he looked at me intently. "I thought my sister's payment was in gold. I was wrong. She paid in revenge."

I grunted. "Lord Sentaro? That was ... satisfying, I admit, but I'd compose a poem praising the beauty of the man's hindquarters and recite it in front of the entire Court tomorrow if that would bring your sister back."

He managed a brief smile then, but his expression quickly turned serious again. "Not Sentaro. I mean you could have simply ignored Teiko's final poem, and her death would have been for nothing and my nephew's ruin complete and final. She offered this to you."

I smiled. "She knew ... Well, say in all fairness that she left the choice to me. Was that a choice at all, Kanemore-san?"

He didn't answer, but then I didn't think there was one. I stood gazing out at the moon's reflection. The charming ghosts were in their procession. I think my neck was extended at the proper angle. The rest, so far as I knew or cared, was up to Kanemore.

I felt his hand on my shoulder. I'm not sure if that was intended to reassure me or steady himself.

"You must drink with me, Goji-san," he said. It wasn't a suggestion.

Despite my sympathy for Kanemore, I had come too far alone. Now he was going to share my burden whether he liked it or not.

"I must drink," I said. "With or without you."

We returned to the Widow Tamahara's establishment. I wondered if we would drink to the point of despair and allow ourselves to be swallowed up by the darkness. Or would we survive and go on, as if I had said nothing at all on Shijo Bridge? While we waited for our saké I think I received an answer of sorts as Kanemore's attention wandered elsewhere in the room. He watched the samuru laughing and drinking at the other low tables, and his distaste was obvious.

"A sorry lot. Always drinking and whoring and gambling, when they're not killing each other." Kanemore sighed deeply and continued, "and yet they are the future."

I frowned. "These louts? What makes you think so?"

Our saké arrived and Kanemore poured. "Think? No, Goji-san—I know. Year by year the power and wealth of the provincial daimyos increases, and their private armies are filled with these samurai," he said, now using the more common corrupted word, "whose loyalties are to their lords and not the Emperor. They are the reason upstarts like the Abe Clan are able to create so much trouble in the first place."

"Dark days are ahead if you are correct."

Kanemore raised his cup. "Dark days are behind as well."

So. It seemed we had chosen to live, and in my heart I hoped that, at least for a while, things might get better. To that end I drank, and as the evening progressed I used the saké to convince myself that all the things I needed desperately to believe were really true.

I told myself that Teiko was right to do as she did. That it wasn't just family scheming or royal ambition. That Kanemore and I, though mostly unaware, had helped her to accomplish a good thing, a noble thing, and time would prove it so. First, in the continued decline of the power and influence of the Fujiwara. Second, in the glory to come under the reign of Crown Prince Takahito, soon to be known to history as His Imperial Majesty, Sanjo II.

My son.

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OPENING TIP-OFF ¶ I got a call from *Sports Illustrated* yesterday. They're doing one of those side-bar pieces where they ask guys to name their starting five, the best basketball players they ever shared a court with. "You don't want that," I told the kid on the phone. "I was in the NBA for seventeen years. I could tell you about guys like Lon McGee, who wore one pair of sneakers his entire career, held together with tape and glue and sheer will-power. Or Pig-Iron Von Ziegler, who smelled like machine oil and whose joints screeched like a stepped-on cat by the end of his career. The best? Who cares about the best? Why settle for the best when I can give you the most *remarkable*?" ¶ The kid thanked me politely, but he told me that wasn't what he needed for his piece. He'd talk to his editor, though, and mention my idea to him. He'd get back to me. ¶ Well, I'm not going to live forever, and I can't wait for his editor. I've got tales to tell, and I have to tell them while I'm still kicking. So here it is, my starting five. Not the most talented guys I've ever played with, but instead, the dirt workers and edge cases and oddballs and sideshow escapees. These are the guys that I'll never forget. These are the guys that [illegible]

THE SHOOTING GUARD [illegible] the second I saw Michael Jordan's wave at the world. The first time I saw it on television, I knew something special was coming. Maybe it was the way he drew back his arm, like a slingshot. Maybe it was the way his tongue flicked out of his mouth, like a lizard's. Maybe it was the way he seemed to hang in the air, suspended by his own will. Maybe it was the way he looked at the basket, like it was the only thing in the world that existed. I don't know what it was, but I knew I was watching a player who was going to change the game. I knew I was watching a player who was going to be the greatest of all time. I knew I was watching a player who was going to be the greatest of all time. I knew I was watching a player who was going to be the greatest of all time

But then I had the injuries. Broken thumb on my shooting hand. Nagging abdominal strain. Lower back spasms. Torn MCL. They piled up. And so did the prime rib and the vodka martinis. Ten years into my so-called career, when I should have been racking up All-Star appearances and MVPs and championship rings, I found myself in Flagstaff, Arizona, just trying to make it onto the team roster.

And, yes, that second day of training camp, the first guy to barf was me.

I stood at midcourt, hunched over, hands on my knees, puke on my sneakers, trying to fight off the ten years of tears I felt welling up from my heart. Why was I still doing this? I wasn't a player anymore. I wasn't anybody. The thing to do was go back to the hotel, paw my way through the honor bar till I could get a flight out, go home, and stay there for the rest of my life.

I heard soft footsteps approach, and I looked into the brown, still acne-dotted face of the Hindu. Oh, you know his name: Le Sai Baba. The Fakir. He gave me that far-off stare that the league's best defenders would learn to fear, and he said to me, in his painstaking, accented English, "I can pierce my cheeks with needles. I can sleep on a bed of nails. I can put my hand in boiling water. I can hang from a tree with hooks in my back. If you wish, I can teach you to run 500 laps and not vomit."

I must've stared at him a full minute before I could catch enough breath to talk. "Yeah?" I wheezed. "And what do you get out of it?"

"When you rebound the ball," he said, "you will pass it to me. I will score. This way, we win many games."

Well. You know. I would have just laughed, only I was too tired to laugh. And that's how I, a ten-year broken-down veteran, came under the tutelage of a 19-year-old foreign kid.

I spent every minute I could with him: on the team bus, at practices, at shoot-arounds. I even asked to have my locker next to his. He talked and talked and talked. And I listened. He knew stuff. He knew stuff about the body, about the mind, about meditation, about pain and pain and pain and how to will it down to something smaller that you could set aside and let do its job without breaking you.

I made the team that year. At the end of the season, when I went home for the summer after we got knocked out of the first-round playoffs, I was voted the league's Most Improved Player. My agent was telling me I had a respectable contract extension to look forward to. And I could go a few nights in a row without needing a drink.

Five years later, I was there for Le Sai Baba's last game. You remember it. You've seen the highlight. The Greatest Highlight Ever. Game Seven of the NBA Finals, our Suns team against Deffy Thompson's Sixers. The game's tied, Deffy's got the ball with 3.5 seconds left on the clock, so he has to shoot it or we all go into overtime. He fires off his smooth jumper just a little short, and I go up for the rebound along with four enemy jerseys. But I know where the ball is going, I almost always do (something the Fakir taught me), and my hands grab it, and I pass it to Le Sai. He flies. No, not jumps, not sails to the rim à la Jordan. He just flies, arcing through the air, across the court. He *flies*, get it? And when he reaches the basket, he dunks it for the win.

You know that old argument. Was his greatest maneuver the flying dunk, or the Indian rope trick he ended his short career with that night, climbing toward the rafters and vanishing from sight in front of the world?

You ask me, the answer is neither. In the estimation of this old broken-down power forward, his greatest trick was, well, me. His greatest trick was giving me something I never had. Something I'd mixed up with arrogance and then lost sight of altogether. The Fakir's greatest trick was giving me some simple dignity.

I don't know where Le Sai Baba ended up, but when I see him (and I know I will, even if I'm a cricket and he's a king) I'm handing him my championship ring. He didn't stick around long enough to collect his own. And I don't really need mine.

THE POINT GUARD

Jane Doyle had eyes that hurt to look at. Blue, clear, bright as diamonds, they seemed to peer into you, through you, beyond you. Whenever we talked, I tried to stare at his chin.

During my second year as a pro baller, he was our starting point guard, and he was phenomenal. The point guard is the guy who typically runs the team. His job is to dribble the ball up the court and direct the offense like a traffic cop. He sets up the plays and gets guys into position. He knows where his teammates are and he knows where his opponents are, and he knows where everyone is going. It's called court vision, and Jane Doyle had it.

SOMEHOW, WITHOUT TURNING AROUND, HE COULD TELL I'D CHANGED POSITIONS, AND HE ADJUSTED, TOSSING THE BALL OVER HIS SHOULDER AND RIGHT INTO MY HANDS.

We were playing Sacramento when Doyle made the most amazing pass I'd ever seen. I was its lucky recipient. We were running down the floor on a fast break toward our basket, Doyle leading with the ball, me trailing. All Doyle had to do was lob the rock straight up in the air for me to catch and slam down for a guaranteed ESPN highlight. But I slipped on a puddle of sweat and lurched left. It was the kind of little mishap that can ruin the flow of a beautiful play, but Doyle didn't let that happen. Somehow, without turning around, he could tell I'd changed positions, and he adjusted, tossing the ball over his shoulder and right into my hands.

After the game, I came up to him. Looking right into his razor stubble, I asked how he'd managed such a beautiful, amazing, no-look pass.

"I see things," he said. "I see a lot. I see where you are and where you're going. I see where you've been."

Where I'd been? What the hell was that supposed to mean?

"Look at me," he said, his voice all frosty. He was creeping me out a little, and I told him as much.

"Look at me," he said again. "You really need to look at me."

I lifted my gaze and met his eyes. I felt my skin grow warm. My

face tingled and a weird burning headache nestled in my forehead. "Don't," I whispered

"I see things," he said. "You were always big for your age, from the time you were a toddler. People thought you were older than you really were and had higher expectations of you. Your father played ball, a little bit, but not good enough, and he accumulated empty bottles instead of trophies. He blames you for doing what he couldn't, and yet you can never do enough. You support your mother and two sisters, but they'll be gone soon, and all your money and fame can't help them. You'll keep your swagger but lose your heart. Your powerful body, the only thing you could always count on, will start to betray you. So far, you've avoided your father's path. You've done well. Not even a sip. But very soon you'll falter, and you'll begin your long, slow fall." He closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, I looked away. "I'm sorry," he said. "But I see things."

I shoved him into his locker. I wrapped a hand around his throat and pulled back a fist, ready to drive it into his face. He didn't try to resist. He just looked at me, unblinking.

I knew I could shatter him. I could dig my thumbs in his eyes. Blind him. Make him stop looking at me. But it wouldn't matter, because it was too late. Because now, whenever I looked in the mirror, I'd see in me what he saw.

The day after my mother and sisters died in the roll-over accident—in the Cadillac SUV I was so proud to have given Mom—I took my first drink. I played that night, too, scoring 26 points for a win. Jane Doyle passed me the ball a lot, but all through that game and afterward, he wouldn't meet my eyes.

I guess he found what he saw hard to look at.

THE CENTER

It's on the books. You can look it up yourself. The biggest man ever to play in the league was center Roman Slezak, the so-called "Slovenian Monster." He was a hair shy of eight feet tall, but that's only because he wore a crew cut. And he was broad, too. Grown men bounced off him like pinballs off bumpers. Dunking the ball was no harder for him than adjusting a shower head. Or it shouldn't have been, given his size and physical ability. Solid muscle. Frightening guy. Inhuman.

I played with him his only season, when we were both on a Seattle team going nowhere. It was supposed to be our year. We'd gotten the draft rights to the Slovenian Monster, and we planned to ride him all the way to championship glory. But we stank.

Everybody blamed Roman, and everybody was right. He was fine in practice—more than fine, he was unstoppable, a force of nature, a devourer of men—but when game time came, he couldn't do anything. He let himself get pushed all over the court by skinny guys a foot shorter than him. When he caught the ball, it was like someone had clonked him over the head with an anvil. He couldn't decide what to do, and he'd just sit there with his stupid baby face and look like he wanted to cry until the shot clock ran out.

After trying everything else they could think of, the coaches called on me to see if I could figure out what Roman's problem was. "You're our resident head case," they told me. "If anyone can pry open his mind, it's you."

It's always nice to feel useful.

One day after a late practice, I lay in wait for him. He was always the last one dressed, like he didn't want to step down around the other guys or something, so I stood quietly outside the locker room. Roman didn't come out, and I passed the time by drinking vodka from my flask. More time, more drink, still no Roman. The Monster continued to hide.

When I couldn't stand it any longer, I went inside. I found him hunched over in front of his locker like a rock formation, quaking with sobs.

"Hey, Roman," I whispered, trying not to startle him. He seemed like a nice kid, but so did Lenny in *Mice of Men*, and I didn't want to end up like something soft and pretty and limp. "C'mon, dude, whatever it is, it can't be that bad." I knew from bad. Oh, yeah. Nobody had a life as bad as mine, so if anybody had a right to blubbering, it was me, and cue the violins, thank you.

Roman looked up at me, snuffling.

I dragged over a folding chair and sat down across from him. I've always been a big man, but next to him, I was a child. "Roman," I said, "you should talk about it."

"Uh-uh," he said, wiping tears with the heel of one mighty paw.

"It's not good to keep stuff bottled up, man. It starts to get all yellow and infected. And then, whatever's ailing you, it runs out and sickens everything. Your friends. Your family. Your *game*."

Subtlety, that was me.

"Eleven," he said, snorking.

I waited, but he gave me nothing more. "Eleven," I repeated. "Hey, is Speedy bugging you?" Speedy Taggart, our back-up point guard, wore the number eleven on his jersey. He was as good a guy as you'll ever play with, but if I found out he was doing something to mess up Roman's game, I'd stuff him down the toilet.

Roman shook his head. "Everything different here. I learn English, but everything different. Everybody ask questions, but agent say talk to nobody. People give me things—presents, liquor, drugs, girls. Agent say don't get in trouble, keep low profile. Everybody always looking at me, expecting me to make great play, do great thing, save team. *Eleven.*"

Eleven. Eleven. How many strippers did we have for Little Elijah Clarke's birthday party? Could it have been eleven? Naw. And Roman wasn't even there for that. He never partied with us. "Eleven?" I asked, but Roman just cried.

I tried to be understanding and sympathetic. Really, I did. For about eight seconds. Then, "Holy shit," I barked. "You baby! You little .. you whiner! Don't you get it? You made it. You got out of whatever radioactive Slovenian goat-hill podunk you came from and climbed all the way to the top. The National Basketball Association. Do you have any idea how many guys would give anything to be where you are now?" I didn't have a guaranteed contract that year and was a bit sensitive on the matter. "Look, baby, our record's 3 and 16. We stink. At this rate we'll be out of playoff contention before the All-Star break. So you get that mammoth chin of yours up and start playing the way you can, or God help me, I'll make you eat your own jock strap."

He looked at me and his eyes kinda got funny, and I got afraid. Maybe I'd awoken something. Which is what the coaches wanted me to do, but they weren't in the room with the Monster and I.

Then his face crumpled. He started sobbing again. "Eleven," he said. "Only eleven."

I got a weird notion. "Wait a minute," I said. "You're not . ?"

He nodded, miserably. "Eleven."

"Aw, shit," I said. "Aw, no shit. You're eleven."

He winced like I'd slapped him. "Agent say don't use bad language. But *everyone* here use bad language. Everything different."

"Well, sh — shoot."

I felt for the guy. I understood the pressure people put on a kid growing up, practically from the first time he touches a ball. Coaches, business execs, even the people who are supposed to have your back and take care of you. The people who call themselves your friends. Your family. Your own parents.

"Alright, son," I said, putting a hand on his granite-slab of a shoulder. "Let's take you home. We can get ice cream on the way."

Roman rode the bench the rest of the season. I hung out with him as much as I could. We ate a lot of ice cream together. And at the end of the season, when he hugged me good-bye at the airport before heading back to his radioactive goat hill, he nearly squeezed my lungs flat. "Quit crying," I told him, doing a bit of blinking myself.

Now, when you ask me the best big man I ever played with, I can't say Roman Slezak. And not just because the eight-footer wasn't very good. It's just that he wasn't very big.

THE POWER FORWARD

During my first few years in the game, I'd always been a starter I never gave it much thought, just treated it as though it was my birthright, having been born with talent When you're young, you tend to take credit for that sort of thing, and you think it'll never go away

The old veteran who came off the bench for me was Slow Joe Briggs A true warhorse, he'd played everywhere. the NBA. the Continental Basketball Association, the Eastern Basketball Alliance, the Carolinas Basketball League, and in more foreign countries than the United Nations's got flags He'd learned stuff overseas that normally didn't apply to basketball, and he was canny enough to apply them

It started during a long road stretch after a game in which I'd scored forty points and grabbed nineteen rebounds Coach awarded me the game ball, and I had a Sharpie out and was ready to sign it and send it off to a sports memorabilia broker when Slow Joe offered me 500 bucks for it.

"Why re you so hot for my ball?" I asked him.

He told me it was for his kids, they were fans, had my posters and shoes and soft drink cans and everything. Slow Joe had something like seventeen or eighteen children, and he was determined to put each and every one of them through college, so I let the ball go for only 400 bucks

When I gave it to him, he ran a calloused hand across the pebbly surface, petting it as though it were a dog "Good leather," he said before leaving the locker room.

Later that night at the hotel, Slow Joe set off the smoke detectors in his room. I was sleeping off a long night at the bar and missed all the commotion, but there was talk he'd set fire to a basketball in the bath tub. He denied it, though With a smudge of soot on his nose, he insisted he'd just been smoking a cigarette to relax

In pregame warm ups the following day, Slow Joe was driving to the basket with a weird gait, running on the balls of his feet. "Just something I learned in Europe," he told me. "Wear out the toe, live to know woe Wear out the heal, ne'er do well. But wear out the ball, you'll live to spend all." I looked down at my own shoes, brand new, because I always broke out a fresh pair for every game Shrugging, I left Slow Joe alone as he dragged and scuffed his feet down the floor

My shot seemed to be off that night, and my energy not so good Midway through the second quarter, Coach put Slow Joe in for me, and I didn't get back off the bench until garbage time in the last few minutes of the match

Later, I spotted Slow Joe talking to one of the arena maintenance workers There was a handshake exchange, smooth as bribing a maitre'd, and the worker cut down one of the nets and gave it to Slow Joe

"Another souvenir for the kids?" I asked him

He hesitated, the limp net in his hands Then, he said, "Basketball is a game of fundamentals. It's about leather and wood and rope, all in contact with flesh When talent fails you, you gotta go to the fundamentals." On the flight to our next game I watched him painstakingly unknot the net and then retie it, muttering dark and low in his deep rumble

Slow Joe could do nothing wrong the next night He dunked He sank shots from long distance He made teardrops and rainbows and finger rolls He blocked He rebounded He threaded passes through the tightest seams. He did two-hand reverse stuffs He did the tomahawk jam. He was out there doing Globetrotter shtick, and it went on like that for most the road trip

Coach knocked on my hotel room door. "We're going to try Slow Joe in the starting spot," he informed me "He's playing phenomenally, and I want to get the most out of him before his energy gives out Besides," he said, smelling my breath, "the extra minutes on the bench might give you time to sleep it off "

I felt my cheeks burning, but I was too stupid to know if it was from anger or shame. "It's not right, Coach. Slow Joe . . he cheated He's been doing spells and shit It ain t basketball he's good at It s voodoo "

Coach just shrugged. "Whatever it is, it's working. Maybe you should try some voodoo of your own." He turned his back and left me alone with the little bottles in the honor bar

For the next few weeks, I watched Slow Joe work He collected shoelaces from guys who were having good games He bought more game balls. He took to touching the northern maple of the floors we played on. Weird smells came from his locker, and Slow Joe Briggs got better and better while I languished on the bench

The final straw was when I got a DNP in the stats sheet. A *Did Not Play, Coach's Decision* It wasn't that I was sick or injured. It's just that I wasn t needed

I had a rule. No drinks before games After games or on days off or during the off-season it was a different story, but before a game, I was sober as a referee But if I wasn t going to play, why bother staying sharp, right? About twenty minutes before tip-off in a game against the Knicks, I reached into my gym bag and unscrewed the cap off a new silver flask decorated with my jersey number in diamonds I raised it to the sky and took my very first pregame drink

I watched the first half of the game go by in a haze We were losing, but not because of Slow Joe's lack of mojo His newest trick was making bank shots from half court, which he'd done three times so far When Coach put me in to give Slow Joe a quick breather, I just wanted to get my few minutes of play over with and get back to hotel with the bar and all the pretty bottles

But something happened Stepping out on the court drunk, the game looked different My muscles worked different. I'd always been a good player, but that night things came without effort I stole balls from crafty point guards and swatted away attempts from big men. I did cross-over moves that broke my defenders' ankles. I was making shots like a Vegas billiards hustler. Even with the way Slow Joe had been playing there was no way Coach could take me out of the game And I topped my performance the next night And the one after that, and the one after that. I became a true believer in the magic of the pregame vodka.

When Coach came to my hotel room again, he told me I had my starting spot back. "Yeah, no shit," I said to him Then I shut the door and had a celebratory drink

Slow Joe walked across the floor toward me at morning practice, taking his time, like an advancing glacier I bounced the ball and tried to look nonchalant "Congrats, youngster," he said when he got to me "You been playing well, you deserve to start "

"Really? No hard feelings?"

"Naw," he said "The starting spot's yours. You won your job back fair and square Me, I thought I had good magic Stuff that I believed in. But you, you found a magic you believe in even more."

I tossed him the ball. "You're not gonna try some stronger voodoo?"

He looked at the ball in his hands, turning it around and around. "Some magic s just not worth the price," he said, tossing the ball back to me "But I expect you'll learn that for yourself soon enough "

THE SMALL FORWARD

In my last year of professional ball, I wasn t even playing in the National Basketball Association Instead I was lacing up my sneakers for the minors' Albuquerque Mirage home to has-beens, never wills, and a couple of maybe-somedays

Meletha Cromwell was one of those maybe-somedays. She was undersized for a small forward, but she had enough speed and hops and basketbal, IQ to make up for it, not to mention the strongest will to win of anyone I d ever known If she'd been born Maxwell or Marcus or Melvin Cromwel., we'd be talking about her now along with Magic and Bird and LeBron.

One night, late in the season, after we'd won a game that had gone into triple overtime, she caught up to me as I moaned and winced

my way onto the team bus, a bag of ice bandaged to my shoulder That was pretty much my postgame routine this late in my career

"Why do you do it?" she asked, draped over the seat in front of me She settled in, turning the baseball cap affixed to her shoulder-length corn rows backward. "You've played seventeen years, you made your money, you got your championship ring. You've got nothing left to prove Why keep punishing your body like this in the bush leagues?"

I guess I could have given her the real answer, that I was still playing because a Hindu fakir shooting guard had saved my life, but I was still terrified of the thing a blue-eyed point guard had seen in me a long time ago, if I kept playing, I felt I could beat that thing into submission But once I finally hung up my sneakers, how long would it take before I replaced the hardwood of a basketball floor with the brass and polish of a hotel bar?

"I might still get called up for a 10-day NBA contract," I told her. "And a guy can never have enough money "

She didn't like that answer. Maybe because it was greedy, or maybe because she knew it was a lie I'll never know

"What about you?" I said, turning tables. "You could be a star in the women's league, but here you are on a bus to El Paso that smells like a sock, putting up with guys coming on to you, flashing you their p---- . hanging you every name in the book Why do you do it?" Some of the hazing had stopped once I made an example of Blue Bobby Douglas and pounded his gut in And there was even less of it after Meletha broke Donny Scudd's nose But you couldn't get rid of all of it. Maybe not ever

She looked out the window at the passing darkness, the desert stars so thick you could believe they'd been smeared across the sky with a putty knife. She had her reasons, maybe things that were hard to put into words, maybe dark things that only a freaky-eyed point guard with court vision could see She gave me the condensed version. "I'm going to play in the NBA someday," she said. "I'm going to be the one who makes it. Until then, I'll play anywhere there's a game."

Well, maybe she would at that But I decided to give her a little nudge "Your game's here in the waste bins," I said. "Down here, you're playing boys. But you go up to the Association, and it's a different world There, you're talking about men.

Her face went real calm and a little scary "Big fellah," she said, "I hope you do get that 10-day contract I hope you get signed for a whole season Hell, for a multiyear deal And I hope you can still hump down the length of a court, because when I make it—and I will—I'm gonna school your ass like you was in second grade "

Looking back, I wish I hadn't said the things I said to her. I wish I'd been one of those who just cheered her along. You collect a lot of regrets in seventeen years, and what I said to her that night is one of my bigger ones

At about four AM, sixty miles west of El Paso, our driver fell asleep at the wheel and flipped the bus. I don't remember much Just a sense of falling, weightlessness, and then crashing back to earth. I was ok. I'd taken harder spills in games But Meletha hit her head bad on the ceiling. I did mouth to mouth and CPR on her until an ambulance finally made it out to the boonies, but I knew from the second I started it was no good I'd seen dead people before.

The newspaper stories all quoted Coach, who said she looked peaceful, content, as if she'd just gone to sleep. I didn't think so. I think she looked pissed off That's a better legacy for Meletha Cromwell, and that's what I wrote in my letter to her folks, up late in my room, drinking ginger ale

Three nights later, we were in Little Rock, Arkansas, scrapping for our playoff lives. At the end of the first half, we lagged behind by 32 points and our season looked to be over None of us cared None of us had the heart to play, me included

In the locker room during the break, Coach mumbled through some coach stuff about tightening our defense, moving the ball better, taking smarter shots, blah blah blah, when Meletha walked in. Her face was gray, and she moved with a limp Her head lolled a bit left and she smelled like a hospital

"Jesus, Meletha," Donny Scudd said. "You ... you really shouldn't be here "

"Shut up." I told him.

"But, man, oh, man, will you just look at her! She ain't with the living no more Jesus, she's de—"

"Shut up," I said again "Don't you tell her that. You don't tell her nothing "

"I'm coming in the game," Meletha said to Coach, her voice like the blackness at the bottom of a well.

What could Coach do? We were losing We were as good as dead He put her in with three minutes to go in the third quarter.

I'd like to tell you Meletha played brilliantly that night I'd like to tell you she lit our fires and got us back into the fight and hit a buzzer-beating shot that clinched us the game.

But try as she might, Meletha didn't really have it going. I'll believe almost anything, but I don't believe in miracles

HER FACE WAS GRAY, AND SHE MOVED WITH A LIMP. HER HEAD LOLLED A BIT LEFT AND SHE SMELLED LIKE A HOSPITAL.

After the loss, I found her a ways down the dark road, walking away from the arena "You wanna know what I learned in seventeen years?" I said, pulling up even with her She mumbled something I couldn't make out. Her mouth wasn't working so good I went on anyway "I learned you don't play this game against the other squad. You only play yourself And the game . . the game isn't even really basketball "

"You sound like a shoe commercial," she rasped.

I laughed a little, as much as I could. "You did good tonight Meletha You did yourself proud."

"Old man," she said, talking slowly, trying hard to make herself understood, "when you're done with the game, you come look me up Just you and me, one on one. You make sure you find me any way you can. And then I'm going to school your fat ass

I watched her go down that black strip of highway, a thin shadow under the Moon, getting smaller and smaller in the distance until she faded from my sight

"Anywhere there's a game," I said Then I shoved my hands in my pockets and went to find the bus I knew it'd be idling in the night, puffing out diesel fumes, ready to take me to the next city, to the next court Anywhere there's a game ▶

DUCKS IN A ROW

BY DEVON MONK ✱ ILLUSTRATION BY YUKO SHIMIZU

I DIDN'T HAVE THE GUN IN MY HAND YET. ANOTHER BOY, ABOUT TWELVE years old like me, walked away from the carnival booth and a little kid, maybe six, put down his nickle. There was room for three people to play but the other two guns were gone, leaving empty chains swinging over the booth's edge.

I'd never been to the carnival before, never seen a real shooting gallery. But I was real good with a gun, or at least that's what my dad would say if he were alive. So I wasted my turn even though my ankles hurt, the blisters on my hands were sore, and a storm was brewing in the hot August sky.

The stuffed toy prizes, hanging in a drift of blue and pink and green on a rod above the booth, whispered to the kid with the gun, but I don't think he heard them the way I did.

"Low," they said. "slow."

The kid aimed high, missed twice, and winged one duck, which made a funny quacking sound, but didn't tip over like it should. The boy looked pretty disappointed and dug in his pockets, but didn't have any money left. He looked up once at the toys, then walked away.

My turn. The guy behind the booth held out greasy hands.

"Nickel for three shots, sonny," he said.

"Say we make it an even four."

The man shook his head. "Rules say three or go try another game. There are folk waiting their turn."

But there wasn't anyone behind me. The wind picked up and the stuffed toys swayed a little more. There was anger and storm in that breeze, coming up big and soon.

If I wanted my shots, I'd best take them now.

So I put down my nickel and the man flipped the lever beneath the lip of the booth to set my gun up for three shots. The gun wasn't much more than a toy rifle, slick and light with a sight on it that was shiny on the top edge and bent pretty bad. I held the rifle up and tucked the stock in tight against my bruised shoulder. I sighted down the barrel to get a feel for the thing even though holding it made the broken blisters on my palms sting.

All the while the ducks clicked by, dragged by a chain wrapped round their feet that clattered over hidden spokes. I shifted how I stood, taking some of the weight off my worst foot.

Painted yellow squares filled the spaces between the ducks. When I looked at them real close, I realized they were shaped like headstones.

"Gonna shoot, or you gonna look at them all day?" the man said.

I thought about flicking the barrel over at the man, pop a bee-bee in his cheek, but this gun didn't have no bee-bee's in it, only air. I put my finger against the trigger and sighted the ducks. Once I squeezed the trigger, air would pop out. If I missed my shot the ducks would play a tape recorded ping or ricochet sound.

If I hit just the right point on the duck at just the right time, the duck would tip over and I'd win myself some respect. And a little justice for all.

I waited, took a deep breath, squeezed, readied for the recoil. My dad would have thought I did a real good job. The one thing he told me I was good at was handling guns. Taught me all he knew himself.

The ping rang out and a sharp ricochet echoed. I'd had the heart of the duck clear in my sights but I didn't even graze the wooden bird.

That wasn't right. If there was one thing I did well, it was shoot.

The wind blew harder until the toys above me rocked, creaked.

"Aim low," the toys whispered to me as inanimate objects often did. "Wait for the last moment. The man, the man skews the chain."

I thought it was right kind of the dead toys to give me advice and all, but I wasn't sure I should take advice from something that had been hanging by its neck since the carnival opened six days ago. Still, I sighted again, waited for the ducks to rock up over the edge of the shooting gallery like a locomotive cranking up a switchback, and started counting.

I had good rhythm. It meant the difference between getting a fist in the eye or the chin and knowing how to dodge the worst of my

WHEN JUSTICE COMES TO TOWN IT MIGHT COME IN A FORM YOU RECOGNIZE, OR IT MIGHT COME IN A FORM YOU FEAR, OR IT MIGHT—FINALLY—COME IN BOTH.

dad's whip at my back. When I counted out the duck's pace and put the sight where the duck's heart—in just three beats—should be, I knew I was gonna hit it dead on.

Out of the side of my eye, I watched the guy behind the booth. He looked bored, like he was watching the rest of the carnival: the snake girls, balloon clowns, and folks with half-eaten corn dogs and ice cones.

But I knew he was looking at me out of the corner of his eyes, just like I was corner-looking him. I took a deep breath, squeezed the trigger, and saw the fella's hand twitch beneath the lip of the booth.

Ping! Ka-zing! The duck quacked, but damn-sure didn't fall over.

I made an exasperated sound. The wind was building up right along with my anger.

"It's a challenge," the man said, "but you look like a fine strapping boy with a good eye and a steady hand. Last shot, you'll have it sighted. For another nickel, I'll load you up three more shots."

The air smelled like hot iron and the clouds rumbled like bellows feeding fire. There'd be a hard rain soon. Another whopper of a storm to clean away my sin. Something hot and loud. Something big as the one that came up yesterday while I was pulling the gun out of the attic. Thunder roaring so loud it covered the shots of the 30 ought 6. Something that would bring rain to soften the dirt and make for good grave digging all night long even if all you had was one shovel and your bare hands.

I hunched my bruised shoulder against the stock and tipped my head a bit to see if I could hear any of the toys talking again. They all just swung there uncommonly quiet as dead things should be, the way I wished my dad had been. I nodded at the man.

"Keep your finger off the lever, and I'll take my last shot."

"Oh no," the toys gurgled.

The man tipped back on his heels, then up again, looking like my dad used to—smiling like the dickens and still mad enough to hit my face into the back of my head.

"This game ain't fixed, boy. Nothing but the lever to load the gun back here. I'd show you so, but you're not allowed to lean over this edge. Now take your shot and get on out of here."

"Low," said the toys above me.

"Quack, click," said the ducks being dragged by the chain.

"You saying you're an honest man?" I asked. "That this is an honest game and I could bring me a sheriff or lawman back here and they'd see there was no wrong doings?"

"Sure thing, sonny. Bring all the law you want."

I nodded again, real slow, like my daddy used to when he talked to the law and told them there wasn't nothing strange about my bruises, wasn't nothing wrong about my broken ankles.

"Just so long as we have a reckoning of things."

"Fire your shot, sonny, and get your britches home to your mamma."

"Low," said the toys, "slow."

I licked my lips and sighted the ducks.

Click, click, click, the ducks rounded the edge, dragged by the chain around their ankles, cutting their flesh and bone with every step as they stumbled behind their daddy's pickup. The ducks staggered forward, ready to get shot, maybe even thinking it would be a relief. I counted, took a deep breath.

The fella flicked his finger under the counter. The ducks slowed. I pivoted so the gun was aimed at the middle of the man's forehead. His eyes opened so wide his eyebrows got hung up under his greasy hair. I squeezed the trigger. Thunder boomed.

He jerked.

Ping! Ka-zing! The ducks quacked. And all fell over.

I held the rifle there at the man's head, feeling the long straight line of power that poured from the end of the gun to the bone in my cheek and right on back to where the stock was tucked up against my heart. It felt warm. Powerful. Strong. Like a man should feel, my dad would say. Except I wasn't sure I wanted to feel like that kind of man.

The gun went heavy and cold in my hands.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" the man asked.

I tipped the rifle down a notch, so the barrel was pointed at his mouth and crooked teeth. Truth was, I suddenly didn't like the gun in my hands at all. Thunder rumbled again and I knew the storm was coming to me.

"You owe me four prizes."

"Bull crap."

I motioned to the ducks with the gun.

He looked over. Sure enough, all four of the wooden ducks were tipped over, flat as a widow's heart.

"You didn't hit those with your shot, boy. You cheated."

"Not likely. This here's a fair game. We agreed on that. I'll take my prizes now."

He glared at me. "The wind blew them over."

"I aim to take what I've earned."

"Get out of here," he said. "You're not getting anything from me."

I raised the rifle again, swallowed hard so my voice came out even and strong.

"Mister," I said, "you know you cheated. You know I shot those first two ducks clean just like the kid in front of me did, and the kid in front of him did. And you know I knocked down those four ducks while this rifle was aimed at your head. I'm a good shot, that's what I'm saying. And if I'm good with a toy gun, you better believe I'm good with anything I put my hands on."

I don't think he understood what I was saying, but he got enough of my drift to snarl at me and pull two toys down by their haunches. "Take your damn toys, but don't ever play this booth again, hear?"

I put the rifle down with full gratefulness and rubbed the feel of it off my palms before taking the two dogs from him. "These are fine, and I'll take them to the kids you cheated in front of me. But I want the ducks too."

"Get the hell out of here, boy."

The wind kicked up and got the booth rocking so hard, all the toys fell off the bar and went rolling like cotton candy tumbleweeds down the dirt and sawdust lane, bouncing into tents and booths along the midway. The man made a grab for the toys, but none of them blew his way, happier, I suppose, to take their chances on the wind. The plywood bolster board of the booth above him fell and darn near crushed his fingers, except he jumped back fast and howled, so I think he mostly got scraped.

Off his footing, he flailed back into the ducks. The chain broke. Ducks and wooden headstones fell to the ground.

Which was all right with me. Every living thing deserves to be free. My daddy never said that, but I know it's true—now that he's dead.

Me, I just turned away, leaned into the wind, and started walking. I planned on finding those boys and giving them the prizes they'd earned. I planned on handing out a little justice for all, and then leaving this town to try being good at something else. Maybe try being someone else. Someone free.

The four ducks waddled up behind me, like inanimate objects sometimes do, wooden feet making clack, clack, clack sounds against the dirt, wooden wings flapping as the thunderstorm finally rang out and pulled a good strong rain out of the hot August sky. ❧

A WHIMSICAL FLYING MACHINE DECORATES THE COVER OF TOM KIDD'S NEW retrospective/biography from Paper Tiger, *Kiddography*: a balloon/dirigible in the shape of a fish, beneath which, suspended horizontally, hangs the passenger, literally a "fish out of water." An eccentric, intriguing image, it's typical of Kidd's oeuvre, in which the artist employs the romantic painting traditions of the Brandywine School to express his whimsical, anachronistic visions.

Anachronism is a key component of Kidd's sensibility. He admits that he takes a dim view of modern technology and art, preferring the romantic nature-themed aesthetics of the previous century and its elaborate, picturesque technology.

"I feel we've made a wrong turn technologically," says the artist. "We abandoned Art Nouveau, Gothic, all these things that reflected the aesthetics and mathematics of nature. I decided that the 19th-century view of the future should be the future, not our 20th-century view."

He just might be the last surviving Victorian artist. Like many a Victorian gentleman, Kidd has a healthy interest in science and is bursting with creative ideas. *Kiddography* is filled with his romantic fantasy paintings of, among other things, dirigibles, fantastic worlds and their peculiar denizens, and Kidd's interpretations of great fantasy literature including *War of the Worlds*. Of the book's gestation, the artist says, "I wrote an entire pseudo biography based on a series of paintings, but Paper Tiger said it wasn't what they wanted to do, so I started over. One day it occurred to me that I had done so many paintings that I could adapt them to a sort of biographical slide-show, insert some humor, and make a book out of it. So *Kiddography* was born."

The artist's sense of humor and color permeates the book, engaging the viewer in clever unexpected details such as those amazing flying machines floating through rose-hued skies.

Kidd calls himself a frustrated scientist and blames a childhood bout with encephalitis—and subsequent medication—on derailing his pursuit of a scientific career. Instead, he veered into science fiction and fantasy. "I love science fiction. I still think of it as the literature of ideas." His enchantment with the field began early when, around age five, he looked up Astronomy in an encyclopedia and found two paintings by Chesley Bonestell illustrating the section. "I was just blown away by them, and kept pulling [the encyclopedia] to look at those paintings over and over again. I couldn't figure out how Bonestell

NOT
KIDDING AROUND...

g those stages. I never thought about what I would be something an adult would be doing. So from that point I just kept my starter drawing spaceships etc.

His first commercial assignments were as a freelance illustrator, working for Fantasy Awareness Classic Awards on Valdemar cards, Golden Legend and other Playing Card publications. Among the publishers for whom he worked were Reader's Digest, Dell books, Ballantine Books, Baen Books, Marvel Comics, Warner Books, St. Martin's Press, and Tor Books. He has illustrated *The Three Musketeers* 1998 William Morrow and *The War of the Worlds* and Trumpet Games. He is also working on ads and a screen saver based on his paintings and previous book covers at *The Immortal Watchmen* 1,900 Toronto, Kaos has been the designer of concept artist for Wesley Fenton, Aviation, Franklin Mint, Danbury Mint, Hedge Gallery. His work has been displayed in many venues including the Science Fiction Museum Hall of Fame, Hershey Institutions and The NASA Future Art Exposition.

Illustrating makes it to earn his living, but his images are his own. Thanks for me artist as therapist. Drawing creates therapy for me is almost a ritual. I start drawing and I don't know what's going to come out. I am in a special feeling. And at the end I feel a sense of pleasure. I start and draw and sketch. I never illustrations I may feel once in a while, I return the living room watch TV and have a sketch with my self.

Then, the I realized I wanted to earn my main focus. Early on I found I had a facility for looking at something and being rewarding it in an interesting way. We were supposed to draw stuff. I drew a face and an alien and said I looked like a real face. One teacher saved me. I had traced it.

When I was 15 I think I was being an artist would be my job. I didn't know how to do this but I figured I'd look it out to the library. *How to Be a Commercial Artist* read it, and in my mind I was set. I didn't want to be a magazine illustrator. I thought about comic books, fashion, news, interstellar war. Normal Rockwell and decided that I wanted to be Wyeth. Then I settled on Frank, a paperback book covers and Boddler. I wanted to become John Berkey or Frank Frazetta.

Later influences came from Robert Peter Tobi, Maxfield Parrish, Ernest Windsor McCay, N.C. Wyeth, Howard Pyle, the Brandywine group, Joseph Stappen Green, Jesse Wilcox Smith, and Violet Oakley.

Wells' unique social and science fiction perfect subject for illustrating the genius of H.G. Wells's masterpiece *The War of the Worlds*. Kaos said, I think because of his collaboration to him, one he took and I mean it was a challenge. H.G. Wells. It was a real honor also to be. I consulted... Wells expert on certain books. I did a 21st century perspective on the painting and a 19th century man and his world with two happening. In order to research technology, information available—and I approached the work like a concept... project. I did preliminary sketches and segments of the

Athos, Porthos, Aramis, and D'Artagnan.

Gnemo's first love, Actonne.

Friedrich Wains, taken from *Gnemo*.

machines, thought about how the Martians might be. I decided that the Martians were already ill upon arrival, which allowed for their ineffectual battle plans, and that their technology varied, which allowed me to have different machines. Even though I feel like I followed the book book pretty closely, I did have a little leeway.

"There's two different endpapers to the book: one is a scene not described in the book just alluded to: an attack on London. And the last endpaper, set ten or fifteen years after the Martians were vanquished, shows the ruins of one of their machines in a field, with cows grazing nearby."

"In *Kiddography*, you'll see that I was so excited about *The War of the Worlds* that I kept going, with my friend Cortney Skinner, continuing the story. I even have Martian war recruitment posters." He pauses for a beat, then admits, "I have problem with stopping. Deadlines are good because they tell me when to stop."

If you talk to Tom Kidd long enough, you will find yourself discussing his long-range project, *Gnemo*, an artistic opus from which the cover image of *Kiddography* was taken and tantalizing images appear throughout the retrospective.

The artist says that *Gnemo* developed from his frustration with telling other people's stories. "I kept coming up with neat ideas, thinking, 'If the author had only done this, or that...' And I began to want to do more, not only paint covers, but tell the stories as well. I found I really like writing.

"So I invented a place filled with wonders, natural, human, other nonterrestrial. And I created an environment that was unique. Even the bathrooms are beautiful in *Gnemo*. Yes, of course, there were zeppelin-type airships. I created a world where they pretty much have to have them. Airships take up a lot less energy to fly, and they can go much faster than we think. When I started researching them, I discovered so many neat things about them, they are such a useful yet underutilized technology. In the world I invented, I made them a little more efficient without changing the laws of physics.

"My protagonist is a young character, Gnemo, who visits the world, a place where he knows nobody, doesn't know the language, and he's got no means to support himself. But there's one

Arboreal Pachyderms

BEING AN ORDINARY WOMAN IS MORE THAN JUST SKIN DEEP.

Jane. A Story of Manners, Magic, and Romance

BY SARAH PRINEAS
ILLUSTRATION BY J.K. POTTER

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Miss Jane Bigg-Wither reached her twenty-first year and, as a single woman must do upon attaining such an advanced age, resigned herself to spinsterhood

That is to say, she embraced it with all her heart

Jane was not ugly, she was not without family connections, she was in possession of a comfortable inheritance Really, she had hardly any reason to remain unmarried

Yet instead of marrying, Jane lived as quietly as possible under the circumstances in the country with her uncle, who was fascinated with all things to do with the magical element, though he had no practical ability himself

"My dear Jane," said Sir Percival over toast and tea one afternoon, "I've just received the most wonderful news." He held up a letter as proof

Jane looked up from her book. "What is it, Uncle Percy?"

"Well, it's the Thameside College of Magic and Technology It seems they want to name a new building after me! Isn't that lovely?"

"Oh, indeed." Jane sighed, closed her book, and prepared to listen.

Sir Percival beamed. "You know I gave them a little money last year. A trifle, really, nothing much "

"I remember it well, sir," Jane replied, smiling briefly at the thought of calling fifteen thousand pounds a 'trifle '

"And by way of saying thank you, they want to name the new building after me. The Sir Percival Bigg-Wither Laboratories It sounds rather good, does it not?" He glanced down at the letter. "The Dean of the college wishes me to attend a dedication ceremony in a fortnight Would you like to come along, Jane?"

"Oh, not again," Jane muttered.

"I beg your pardon, my dear?"

Jane sighed. How could she say no? But visiting the Thameside College of Magic and Technology meant encountering

Warlocks. Ugh. Jane shuddered

The previous year Sir Percival had invited several newly qualified warlocks to Wither Castle, and every one of the young men had proposed to Jane. They had followed her around the estate, they had challenged each other to duels over who would escort her in to dinner; they had taken every opportunity to accidentally-on-purpose brush up against her or take her hand Poor Sir Percival had been devastated when Jane had turned down every proposal, for he would have been delighted to call a warlock his nephew-in-law But Jane was adamant absolutely no warlocks

And so she remained a spinster.

"You will come, won't you my dear?" her uncle asked

Jane composed herself. "Yes, of course I will, Uncle Percy."

Sir Percival gave a satisfied nod. "Very good." He cocked his head and gave her a sly wink. "I believe the Viscount Sanditon will be in attendance "

"That's what I'm afraid of," Jane murmured Of all her persistent suitors, Sanditon was the worst

"I beg your pardon?"

"I am quite sure he will be, Uncle Percy "

Sir Percival patted her hand. "Then it's all settled. Thameside College a fortnight from today Lovely!"

As Jane had expected, the dedication ceremony consisted of one tedious speech followed by another, which were in turn followed by a tedious celebratory tea held in the Dean's gardens overlooking the river. Jane kept an eye on her Uncle Percy; as the center of attention, his round face grew pink with happiness and sherry Jane, of course, was besieged by admirers, warlocks-in-training and several professors of magic At the earliest opportunity she pleaded indisposition and escaped with a cup of tea to a quiet, shaded pergola

She was not alone for long

A lean figure wearing a fashionable high-collared black cape, an embroidered waistcoat, and a quizzing glass hanging from a ribbon around his neck approached: Sanditon He was rich, handsome, dashing, titled, everything a spinster might desire

Jane raised the teacup before her face and shrank into the shadows, but it was too late, she had been spotted "Oh damn," she murmured

As the viscount spied her, he gave an elegant bow. "My dear Miss Bigg-Wither!"

In response to his unctuous smile, Jane lifted the corners of her mouth and showed her teeth

AS SHE ENTERED THE ROOM, THE TALL MAN'S FROWN GREW DEEPER.

"Alas," he said, seating himself
with a flourish on the bench beside her and
seizing her hand, "that the fairest flower should hide
herself away to bloom unseen."

Jane remained silent, she could hardly agree or disagree with such a statement and she refused to waste a sniper on this particular suitor Instead she sipped her tea

"I have been speaking with your uncle," Sanditon said

Jane looked up, alarmed "Upon what subject, sir?"

Sanditon stroked her hand When he spoke, Jane thought she could see tiny blue sparks—the lingering presence of the magical element—winking from his teeth "We spoke, Miss Bigg-Wither, about Wither Castle I overheard Sir Percival mention to the Dean that his estate is somewhat . troubled "

Troubled wasn t the half of it, Jane thought Despite Uncle Percy's inability to practice magic, the Bigg-Wither estate was strangely fraught with elemental storms and the odd occurrences that accompanied them. The castle s west tower had been rebuilt repeatedly after being transformed by elemental bolts into ice and, on one memorable occasion, butter The knot garden was infested with homunculi The ha-ha had migrated from one field to another, and sheep continually stumbled into it, the stupid creatures, breaking their legs The maze was dangerous, nobody knew any longer, what lurked at its center and the gardeners refused outright to enter it.

"In order to explain all the odd phenomena," Sanditon was saying, "Sir Percy and the Dean of the College have requested that I , as their most capable recent graduate, pay you a visit to investigate He gave Jane's hand a lingering kiss. "As a warlock, I was delighted to agree; as a man I am even more delighted. I shall join you at Wither Castle in five days' time."

"Oh," said Jane "How nice." He'd made a mistake. Now that she knew when he was coming, she could make arrangements to go on a shopping trip to London or on a visit to friends One way or another, she'd not be at Wither castle when Sanditon arrived

Later, after Jane had managed to scrape Sanditon off, she entered the Dean's house in search of her uncle Sated had enough tea and had fended off several more unwanted advances by young warlocks It was time to return home

As she padded down one long, carpeted hallway, she heard raised voices coming from a room at the end Jane continued, more quietly, and peered through the crack in the door into the Dean's study The Dean himself was seated behind a wide, polished desk Standing on the patterned carpet, his back to Jane, was another man The first thing Jane noticed about him was his height, which was exceptional, the second thing was his anger, for it was evident in the set of his shoulders and the clenched fists at his sides

"Absolutely not," the man was saying

The Dean leaned back in his chair and laced fat fingers over the waistcoat stretched across his belly "You haven't any choice, Day To begin with, someone must go along to keep an eye on Sanditon and his . er . you know His condition. And I shouldn't have to remind you that you still owe the tuition from your last semester, and you shan't be granted a diploma until it is paid "

"I realize that," Day replied. He sounded as if he were speaking through gritted teeth "So now I've got to drop everything to trot out to some nobleman's estate to find out why his damned sheep are behaving strangely?"

The Dean nodded "Better that, Day, than reading the *Political Register* and fraternizing with Cobbett and his lot "

"On the contrary," the man replied, "The efforts of the Luddites are far more important than the Bigg-Wither shrubbery. Elemental magic must never be used to run machines that take work away from honest craftsmen. We will stop it any way we can."

"Machine breaking, you mean," the Dean said, shaking his head "Diploma or not, Day, you're the finest warlock the college has ever produced, and you're wasting your talent on radical activities that will only land you in prison "

The tall man shrugged His coat, Jane noticed, was rather shabby, and his dark hair needed cutting This, she felt sure, was no fine gentleman His next words confirmed her suspicion "Then I'll go to prison," he said "But at least—" Suddenly he broke off and straightened, head cocked as if listening to something Jane was certain she hadn't made a noise, but somehow he'd sensed her presence. Slowly, he turned to face the door

As his eyes met hers, Jane caught her breath, feeling as if his angry gaze were penetrating the door and the silken folds of her tea gown and her skin to the very core of her self To a place where no one had ever been before What did he see there, she wondered, and why did it make him look so fierce? She broke the gaze, looking down to compose herself After taking a deep, calming breath, she smoothed her dress and opened the door wider.

As she entered the room, the tall man's frown grew deeper. "You've been eavesdropping!

"You have a very loud voice," Jane replied and, retreating into the forms of politeness, held out her hand "I am Jane Bigg-Wither. I believe you have been invited with Viscount Sanditon to investigate the odd things that have been happening at my uncle's estate "

The man named Day continued to stare, stepping closer, as if drawn against his will, to take her hand "You're Jane Bigg Wither "

"As I said, that is my name "

His eyes narrowed. "I've heard about you."

Jane cursed inwardly and gave him a tight smile From Sanditon, she had no doubt What on earth had the viscount told this man? "How very interesting "

He nodded Still gripping her hand, he moved closer, peering down at her His eyes were gray, she noted, and his nose was rather long "What they say is true," he said. "How do you do it?"

"Do what, sir?"

He opened his mouth to speak, then gave himself a little shake and released her hand, "My name is Aubrey Day."

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Day," Jane said. "You will be arriving at Wither Castle in five days?"

"I don't seem to have any choice "

Jane smiled, and he blinked. "Good." She nodded at the Dean, who bobbed a hasty bow in return, and left the room.

In the hallway, Jane leaned against a wall, knees weak. Mr Aubrey Day was a warlock like all the others, but she'd never encountered anyone like him, anyone who made her feel so . . exposed And he was odd in a way that all the others were not, from his radical politics, to his anger, to his unusual height. Perhaps she would be at Wither Castle after all, in five days' time

If Miss Jane Bigg Wither took extra care with her dress and coiffure on the fifth day hence, one might argue that she did so at the behest of her uncle, who wanted her to appear at her loveliest for the visiting warlocks

Those two gentlemen arrived in Viscount Sanditon's private carriage followed by another carriage packed full of baggage and the nobleman's valet, hairdresser, and bootblack. The carriages rattled over the cobblestoned courtyard and to a halt before the castle, which loomed in all its moated, turreted majesty before them Jane and her uncle came out of the keep's great double doors to meet

their visitors. The afternoon was cold and blustery and Jane s skirts blew against her legs and tendrils of her hair loosed themselves from their pins. The air felt prickly, the way it did before the advent of elemental storms.

"My dear Viscount!" Sir Percival cried, beaming and clapping a hand to his old-fashioned wig, which threatened to fly away in the wind. "And Mr Day. Welcome, indeed!"

"See to the baggage, Day," Sanditon ordered. Tossing a fold of his cape over his shoulder he bowed, then advanced upon Jane and took her hand. "You are a most gracious host, Sir Percival, and your niece As always, a delight Miss Bigg-Wither I greet you " He bent to kiss her hand Jane let it lie limp in his grasp

Aubrey Day, who wore a woolen muffler around his neck and the same shabby coat he'd worn before, turned from where he had been unloading a crate from the second carriage and greeted her uncle with a brief bow To Jane he gave a nod and a look of suspicion Then he turned back to the baggage

Sir Percival was intrigued "Mr. Day! What is that you've got there?" He pattered down the steps and out into the courtyard "Did you bring . . equipment? And, perhaps . instruments?"

Aubrey Day nudged one wooden crate with his foot "This is a portable Tuppence device "

Leaving Sanditon at the front door to instruct his servants, Jane fol lowed her uncle, noticing that Aubrey Day edged away from her to stand behind another pile of crates

"Portable! Really! And this one?" Sir Percy asked, pointing to a cloth-covered dome

"Good afternoon, Mr Day," Jane said.

Ignoring her outstretched hand, Aubrey Day muttered a greeting and turned to her uncle "This, sir," he said, "is a bellweather "

"Indeed!" Sir Percival stooped toward the dome "For predicting the onset of elemental magic storms? Is it a bird? Might I have a look?" Before Aubrey Day could answer, Jane s uncle had swept the cover from what proved to be a domed cage. The animal within a small, brown mouse, lifted its nose at the disturbance, twitched its tail, and settled again into a furry ball. "It stirred!" Sir Percival said, squatting down to peer into the cage

Aubrey Day crouched beside him, frowning. "Yes, it did As far as I know, no elemental storms are forecast for this area. It's very odd."

As he stood up, Sir Percival laid a sly finger alongside his nose "Ah ha, Mr Day!"

Aubrey Day got to his feet Without seeming to realize it, he had moved to stand close beside Jane "Ah ha, Sir Percival?"

Jane answered "He means, Mr. Day, that elemental storms do not behave as predicted around Wither Castle We have many, many rather unexpected manifestations of magic in fact. That is part of the problem."

Aubrey Day frowned down at her. "Part of the problem," he repeated. He gave himself a shake, as he had in the Dean's office, and stepped away from her.

At that moment, Sanditon minced down the steps from the front door of the castle As he stepped toward them, he sucked a few minuscule sparks of magical element from his fingertips, which he wiped with great fastidiousness on a handkerchief. "Be sure the device is handled carefully Day." He seized Jane's arm. "And, my dear Miss Bigg-Wither, we must immediately get you in out of this nasty wind."

Later, after the visitors had seen to their baggage and their rooms, they gathered in the drawing room for conversation, to be followed by tea. Jane tried to ignore Sanditon, who had squeezed in beside her on the sofa and kept pressing his thigh against hers even while nibbling sparks from his fingertips Her uncle sat opposite her in a comfortable armchair, and Aubrey Day stood with an elbow on the mantel, glaring at the fire

After an exchange of pleasantries, Jane's uncle introduced his favorite subject "My dear Viscount, now that you've unpacked, have you had the opportunity to consult your aetherometer?"

Sanditon gave an elegant shrug "You must ask Day, Sir Percival I leave all of the more instructive tasks to him, as he has not yet taken his degree It is good practice for him, you see."

Aubrey Day continued to frown at the fire "You were right, Sir Percival. The glass is falling. The bellweather is agitated enough that I think a storm will arrive by tonight."

Uncle Percy beamed. "Then we will certainly see some magical transformations "

"Indeed," said Sanditon, reaching beneath the tea table to place a hand on Jane's knee "The storm will offer a perfect opportunity for me to conduct a few experiments " He caught Jane's eye and gave her a glinting smile "I like experiments, Miss Bigg-Wither, don't you?"

Jane responded by reaching down to push his hand off her knee.

Sanditon continued unfazed "Now that you have an expert on hand, Sir Percival, I will have the odd occurrences explained in a trice, I assure you

"I do hope so," said Uncle Percy He went on to describe the major and minor transformations wreaked upon his estate by elemental storms during the past ten years. "We have," he concluded, "had some very odd chicks hatching from the eggs laid on the home farm The pullets are not fit for eating, of course."

After this comment, a brief silence fell. Aubrey Day stirred at his post by the hearth. "What about you, Miss Bigg-Wither? Have you an interest in elemental magic?"

Jane blinked, surprised at being brought so suddenly into the conversation "Yes I do, Mr Day," she replied. "I have long wished to commence a course of study, in fact, in order to educate myself "

Aubrey Day nodded. "You should begin with Sally Tuppence's work."

"I have long wished to read Miss Tuppence s treatises," Jane said "I think it would be interesting to replicate some of her experiments Uncle Percy, did she not attend Thameside College?"

"Well, yes, my dear Miss Bigg-Wither," Sanditon interrupted He gave Jane a benevolent smile and returned his hand to her knee. "But a lady such as you are ought not pursue such studies. Those sorts of things are not appropriate for study by the gentler sex."

At the hearth Aubrey Day straightened. "How can you say, that, Sanditon? Tuppence was a genius, the greatest scientist we've ever known Without her work, we'd know almost nothing about the operations of the magical element."

Sanditon gave a dismissive sniff. "Day, we all know that Mistress Tuppence was a very great scientist. But she carried out her research fifty years ago, and then the world was a very different place. Our age is more refined, more polite We would never think of training up ladies to be scientists In any case, Day, you are not a suitable advisor to a young lady of Miss Bigg-Wither's class."

Scowling down at the carpet, his hands thrust into his pockets, Day replied, "I don't see why Miss Bigg Wither shouldn't study magic if she wants to."

Jane opened her mouth to state her enthusiastic agreement, when she was interrupted by her uncle. "Viscount Sanditon is quite right, Jane Magic is not for ladies. And now, my dear, you may ring for tea "

Jane bit her lip to hold back her comment. Her uncle's gentle commands were to be obeyed With a sigh, she rose from the sofa and crossed to the bellpull, where she rang for the maid. Aubrey Day returned to his morose contemplation of the flames

When the tea tray was brought in, Jane reseated herself by the tea table and poured out, offering sugar and lemon and cucumber sandwiches. "Sugar, Mr. Day?" Jane asked with a sigh, holding up his teacup "Lemon?"

"No " He looked up, hesitating before crossing the room to her As she held out his tea, their hands met and his jerked back, the cup and saucer fell to the floor between them, making a mess of delicate shards and tea on the patterned carpet

"Oh, damn," Jane cursed quietly Aubrey Day looked up, his expression shifting from dismay to amused surprise

"I beg your pardon, my dear?" her uncle asked from his armchair

Jane picked up a napkin and bent to dab at the tea, which had stained the hem of her skirt. "I said 'Oh bother, Uncle Percy. I've broken the cup.'"

"You could never be so clumsy, Miss Bigg-Wither," Sandston interjected with his glinting smile. "It was clearly Day's fault."

"No matter, my dear," Sir Percival said. "Rung for the abigail, she will clean it up."

"My lord Viscount, would you be so kind?" Jane asked.

Sandston agreed, rising from the sofa to cross to the bellpull. As he stood, Aubrey Day knelt down beside Jane and began picking up broken pieces of china. His bent head was very close to hers. The frayed collar of his coat, Jane noted, was turned up at the back, untidy. She restrained the urge to reach out to smooth the collar, instead leaning closer to whisper, "I wish to speak privately with you, sir."

Aubrey Day placed a handful of shards onto the tea tray. "Why?"

"Hmm. You might save me a reaching list." She straightened and put down the napkin.

Aubrey Day remained on his knees beside her. "Really?"

"Yes," Jane whispered.

"Really?" he repeated, leaning toward her.

"Well, no, sir." What excuse might she give? "As my uncle indicated, something very strange is going on here."

"I am aware of that."

Having rung for the maid and explained the accident, Sandston was returning to his place on the sofa.

Jane let out an exasperated breath. "Quickly, sir. Might we meet later?"

"All right."

Jane gave a relieved nod. "Good. The library, then, in one hour."

As evening fell, the storm predicted by the bellweather and the aetherometer advanced. Though she was not a witch or warlock, Jane felt a tingling excitement in the air as she entered the library. The room took up two stories in the castle's south turret and consisted of tiers of shelves built into the curving walls, each shelf jammed with books on every subject. The shelves were interrupted, here and there, by tall windows, which had replaced the original arrowslits, and by a set of French doors, which opened up onto a veranda, which in turn looked over the infested knot garden and the maze. Through the windows, Jane saw an elemental storm crouched over the distant hills, ready to pounce. Now and then a blue flash of magical element flickered on the underbelly of the gray-green clouds.

Moments after Jane had arrived, Aubrey Day joined her, closing the door behind him. "I wasn't sure you would be here," he said, crossing the room to stand before her, frowning.

"Frankly, sir," Jane replied, "I thought the same thing of you." He was standing rather close and in the dim light he appeared very tall and dark.

He is a radical and a warlock, Jane reminded herself. She took a step back.

"Oh, no," he said, following. "I came. I didn't want to, but I did."

"You didn't want to, sir?"

"No." With a visible wrench, he turned away from her and, as if seeking protection, went to stand behind a reading table. "I can't figure it out. You are the niece of an idle nobleman. I should hate you on principle."

Jane thought about protesting, but it was true. Uncle Percy was, indeed, idle. So was she, for that matter, though she had long ago tired of idleness.

Day continued. "Even so, I can't stay away from you."

Jane nodded. "You're just like all the rest."

He looked up, and suddenly his face seemed alert and not quite as angry. "Just like all the rest? What do you mean?"

"Warlocks." She shuddered.

"What do you mean, *warlocks*?"

"Whenever I meet a warlock, he . . ." Jane paused, embarrassed, then told herself to be practical. "He attempts to take liberties with my person."

Aubrey Day raised his eyebrows. "You mean you were not encouraging Sandston? He is not your lover?"

"Certainly not! He simply will not leave me alone."

"That is very interesting." Day looked around the room. "Go and stand over there, Jane, by the window. And I will stand here, by the door."

Jane went to stand by the window. The room darkened as, out side, the storm clouds advanced over the setting sun. "We ought to light a candle," she said.

"Just a minute. Stay over there."

He really should address her as 'Miss Bigg-Wither.' Most ladies would not put up with such behavior. "You are not very polite," she noted.

"No," he agreed absently. He frowned down at the carpet for a long, silent minute, then looked up at her. "There's definitely something. I can still feel it, but it's not too bad. I'm coming closer now. Stay where you are." He took a few steps toward her, keeping the table between them, avoiding her eyes. "All right." He swallowed. "Don't be alarmed, Jane. I'm coming right up to you." He did so.

Jane closed her eyes. But she felt his presence, very near. When she opened her eyes, he was standing before her, arms folded as if restraining himself, again staring at the floor. "What is the matter, Mr. Day?"

"It's stronger here." He drew a shaky breath. "I'd better go back to the door." He retreated, leaning against the door, clinging to the knob as if to anchor himself. "There's only one explanation for it." He fell silent, gnawing his lip.

"What explanation, sir?"

He did not answer.

"Tell me at once, or I shall come closer!" she threatened.

He looked up, alarmed. "No! Don't do that." He looked around the room. "Sit down in that chair next to you. I'll sit down here, and we'll be safe."

She sat down next to the window. "Now tell me."

"All right." Without seeming to realize what he was doing, he stood up and began pacing across his side of the room. "We know of three types of magical creatures. The first are the Reservoirs, which draw the element within themselves and store it. Extremely rare. Maybe one in a generation, and none in England since last century. Then Bellweathers, like the mouse I brought." As he lectured, his pacing continued, but with each pass he was drawn closer to her side of the room. "Bellweathers are somewhat common." He halted and stood before her chair looking down at her, his eyes alight. "But you, Jane, are something else altogether."

Jane slowly rose to face him. The room had grown very dark. From the windows came, at frequent intervals, flashes of elemental lightning. Thunder growled, even through the thick stone walls of the turret. Jane saw elemental sparks twinkling from the ends of Aubrey Day's hair, and then she saw nothing but darkness, for he had bent down to seize and kiss her.

Jane expected to feel repelled, for in her experience warlocks were repellent. For some reason, she did not. Instead, she returned the kiss, with interest.

At that moment the elemental storm broke with a crashing roar over the castle and the library door flew open to reveal a lean, shadowy figure: Sandston.

Jane and Aubrey Day drew apart, but it was too late—they'd been seen.

The Viscount advanced, his mouth a snarl and his black cape aswirl. "I might have known! Sneaking away, Day, to assault this innocent young maiden!"

Beside her, Jane thought she heard Aubrey Day mutter a comment on who was assaulting whom.

Sandston circled the table and advanced. "Fear not, Miss Bigg-Wither!" He paused and gave what sounded to Jane like a high-pitched cackle. "I will avenge you! This blackguard will not live to rue the day he stole you away from me!" The storm punctuated his

challenge with a ferocious strike of elemental magic.

There goes the west turret again, Jane thought

Aubrey Day took her hand and they backed away from the advancing Viscount. "What is the matter with him?" Jane whispered

"He's addicted to the element," Day replied. "It makes him. Well, you can see for yourself."

As they watched, the magical element saturated Sanditon's body. He stood before them, lighting the room, cobalt sparks sizzling from his skin and the ends of his hair, surrounding him like a scintillant aura. "I challenge, you, Day, to a duel!" he shouted.

Aubrey Day glanced at the window. The storm crashed and rolled outside, the sky flickering with elemental bolts. "All right." He shrugged. "Name your weapon."

Jane gave an exasperated shake of her head. "Oh, this is stupid. You can't fight him, Aubrey."

Ignoring Jane's comment, Sanditon sneered. "Of course you wouldn't know this, Day, as you are not a gentleman, but it is for you to name the weapon."

"Fine." Aubrey Day said. "Magic."

For a moment, Jane thought she saw Sanditon hesitate

But then he gave one of his shrieking laughs. Without waiting for Jane to get out of the way, he shouted out a spell, which emerged from his mouth as a roiling ball of element. After floating in the air for a second, as if orienting itself, the spell flew through the air toward them, shedding sparks as it came

Calmly, Aubrey Day stepped out of the way, pulling Jane with him.

The ball of element splattered into the French doors, which dissolved into a whirl of sawdust and sand.

Invited in, the storm blasted through the open area. Thunder shook the turret, and bolts of elemental lightning ricocheted across the room, striking the shelves; each book hit by the element transformed into a bewildered white dove that floundered in the buffeting gusts. Sanditon was forced to his knees, the cape wrapped around his face.

Over the howl of the wind, Aubrey shouted, "Too dangerous in here, Jane! Go outside!"

"But the storm!" she shouted back

He grasped Jane by the shoulders and bent to speak into her ear. "It won't hurt you, Jane—it can't. The element—" He paused to glance over his shoulder at Sanditon, who was struggling to his feet. "—It loves you." With that, he pushed her toward the veranda and turned to face Sanditon

Jane stumbled outside. The storm had pounced upon the castle and was shaking it as a cat does a mouse. Playful, she thought, but with rather serious effects for the mouse. Elemental bolts sizzled through the air. Peering through the darkness, Jane saw the knot garden writhing with the gyrations of thousands of tiny, green-skinned, dancing homunculi. Beyond, a dark shadow loomed up out of the maze. Across the lawn, with the sound of cracking branches, an ancient oak toppled beneath the onslaught of wind and magic

Yet not a single stray bolt threatened her. Even the wind seemed to caress, rather than buffet. Aubrey Day was right. The magical element loved her. She was not a witch or warlock, so she could not use the element to transform the world. But if she called to it, might it come to her?

Jane stepped to the edge of the veranda and opened her arms, hardly expecting any response. At once, the storm whirled into a vortex above her, snapping with elementa, lightning and blue-black clouds. Her skin tingled, and sparks effervesced from her fingertips. A great bubble of joy expanded in her chest. She threw back her head and rose up on her tiptoes, felt her skirts swirling about her legs and the pins explode from her hair, which writhed about her head like enchanted snakes

As the focus of such exaltation, Jane cried out with happiness. She let the joy fill her for another moment, then composed herself. Very well, she told the storm, catching her breath. I've very much enjoyed your visit, but I'm afraid you must leave now.

From inside the library came a flash of sapphirine light and a crash of thunder as the element being used by the dueling warlocks rushed to obey Jane's request. After swirling about her for another minute, the storm reluctantly drew off. Jane felt the element tingling against the surface of her skin, then fizzing slowly away. As the magical storm departed, the clouds opened up and an ordinary rain pelted down

From the hole in the turret where the French doors had stood, Jane saw a tiny lizard like creature emerge. Sanditon? Peering through the curtain of rain, she saw it skitter across the veranda, down the steps, and into the maze. The bushes there twitched, as if a large shape had shifted, and were still.

Next, a few battered-looking white doves fluttered from the opening, and then Aubrey Day appeared. He looked a bit ragged but, to Jane, otherwise unharmed. She breathed a sigh of relief

He approached her, cautious. "Are you all right, Jane?"

Jane smiled. She felt far beyond all right, she felt transformed. Even her uncle would not be able to determine her fate from now on. She would refuse to be idle, she would study magic, if she liked. Perhaps she'd even attend Thameside College and become a scientist, like Sally Tuppence. "I am quite all right, thank you."

Aubrey Day glanced at the storm, which was trundling off over the distant hills. "Good," he said. Then he turned his full attention on her. "Jane, I will leave you alone now, if that is what you want."

"No, sir," Jane said. "I think—" She paused. The lingering elemental magic seemed to be sparking in her bones, making her want to rise up on her toes and do . . . something . . . to the man before her. She restrained herself. "In the library, earlier, sir. We were interrupted."

Aubrey Day swiped the ragged fringe of hair from his eyes. "Right. Interrupted."

Jane couldn't stop herself from smiling, thinking of the kiss they had begun. "You were about to tell me what kind of magical creature I am," she prompted.

"Ah. Right. You are a Lure, Jane."

"A Lure?"

"The Lure attracts the element to itself, which is why you have so many storms here. You lure them, Jane. Warlocks and witches, too, nearly always have a very low level of the element present in our bodies. Not enough to effect a spell."

"But enough that you respond to the Lure," Jane noted.

"Yes. So it's mechanical."

"What is?"

"My attraction to you."

"What a relief that must be," Jane said. "You can go away and never think about me again."

"Yes," Aubrey Day agreed.

Jane frowned. He'd answered just a bit too quickly. Well then, it was up to her. "I suggest an experiment."

He raised his eyebrows but did not speak.

"You must kiss me, sir, and I will kiss you, and we will determine whether the attraction is, as you say, mechanical or whether it is, as I suspect, not."

Without hesitation, Aubrey Day bent down and kissed her. She, at the same time, kissed him. After a few minutes he stopped. He looked at her, and caught his breath. "Not," he said

"Not, sir?"

"No, Jane. Not."

Heart of

IT TAKES A BRAVE, OR FOOLISH, MAN TO VENTURE OUT ON THE ICE IN EARLY SPRING. WILL IT CRACK OR WILL IT HOLD HIM? BY JENA SNYDER
ILLUSTRATION BY CRAIG ELLIOTT

I think it was someone's wedding, but I don't recall. I only remember the music, Uncle Luc and his older brother Francois with their bodies, and everyone dancing.

The stranger came to town perhaps once evening each month

her chaste virgin kiss."

to let me walk her through the dark forest to keep her safe from the night creatures."

different than you or me?"

Yougue where she lived alone.

Yougue making me shiver.

night. Then, she was lovely."

my arms. "Whatever had possessed you?"

kissing me where I never dreamed a woman would touch a man, let alone take him in her mouth In her passion, she grazed me with her teeth, and Amélie's warning rang sudden and loud in my memory.

Mangeur d'homme Man-eater.

I thought I was moments from being torn limb from limb "Stop, stop!" I cried "For the love of God, I beg you, stop!"

Kemewan lifted her head her dark eyes filled with confusion "What is it, my sweet one?" she whispered "What is wrong?"

I felt a fool then, crying out like a frightened boy We huddled together in a cover filled with goose down, and in her arms in her narrow bed, I begged her forgiveness for thinking, even for a moment, that she was some man-eating monster

She grew very still and quiet There were things that walked the woods, she said, that would kill and eat a man, and not all of them were animals One was the creature her people called the *wittigo* It was a towering phantom beast made of wind and ice, they said, that swooped out of the sky to devour fools who ventured out alone in the winter night Few ever saw it in its true form and lived to speak of it later

"Is it like the *loup-garou*?" I asked "Does it change into some kind of animal?"

No, she said, and she did not know how creatures such as the *loup-garou* came about or if they even existed She had never seen one in all of her years Something in the way she said that, *all of her years*, made gooseflesh rise on my arms "But you have seen the *wittigo*?" I asked "When? What happened?"

In her sixteenth year, she said with heaviness in her voice, winter came early and hard, keeping the land in its grip so long, her people began to starve She and her husband lived alone in their winter hunting camp, as was their people's custom, and every time her husband came home from hunting, he brought news of another family that was gone Chewing bark and wood, even leather, many starved to death, and many more grew so weak they lost their lives to simple fevers or small hurts Dozens went into the forest in search of food and never came back Even rabbits were scarce, and the hungry cries of wolves echoed through the long nights

"There was one family ." Kemewan's dark eyes grew distant then, and she hugged the blankets close, begging me to hold her, to keep her warm. This part of the story, she said, made her cold to her bones "The husband insisted time and again that his wife give half of his portion to their three small sons, feed the children, always the children, but it made no difference the two eldest died within a day of each other Only one son remained, the youngest, still on the breast, and the wife was so thin and weak, her milk was like water His belly empty, the child cried all the time.

Soon the husband fell ill and could not hunt He was too sick to rise from his bed, and though the wife put on his heavy winter clothing and went out in the howling wind and snow, she could catch neither fish nor fowl nor any other creature

Her husband was dying She could see him wasting away before her eyes. She herself grew weak, stumbling and dizzy, losing her thoughts She would find herself standing in the open door, near frozen, having forgotten where she was going. Waking nightmares possessed her, her beloved husband reduced to mere bones, taken from her Worse were the dreams of thick stew bubbling on the hearth, rich with meat and marrow bones, for when she woke, there was nothing in the pot but a gruel of moss and water Her husband vomited it all up when she fed it to him She knew it was the end. He would not survive the night With her heart breaking, she crawled into bed with him and held him close to keep him warm.

Kemewan gave a long shuddering sigh I pulled her close as the young wife had held her dying husband, and I could feel her bones through her skin.

That night she dreamed again of stew, that she was cutting up a fat rabbit and putting it in the pot, that she was spooning the broth, gleaming with rich fat, into her husband's mouth With every spoonful, his wasted flesh filled, before her eyes, he grew whole and well again, his eyes sparkling with life and joy Sated, he put the bowl aside still half full The wife took one of the meaty bones and ate the flesh Like her husband, she grew strong and whole Unlike her husband, she was not satisfied. She drank the remaining broth and licked the bowl, every inch, and sucked the soft marrow from the bones till they were hollow and white. But still she was hungry, ravenously hungry, even more hungry than before

Kemewan fell silent, staring sightlessly into the fire The reflected flames danced in the black of her eyes, making them look fiery red "And then .." She shivered, her soft mouth trembling "The husband looked into the bowl his wife had licked clean and saw all the little bones, the flesh nibbled off. For the first time that night, he realized he had not heard the boy's hungry weeping *What is this meat you have cooked for me?* he demanded *Where is my son?"*

A chill went through me. "No. " I breathed "Oh no, no

"The husband snatched up the long-bladed boning knife, the same one his wife had used in her waking dream to butcher the child, and, cursing her for what she had done, he drove it deep into his broken heart

"Her reason fled her," Kemewan said, her voice scraped thin "Wearing only her sleeping gown, no shoes on her feet, she ran into the forest Neighbors from five miles distant heard her wild screams that night, carried on the wind."

"What happened to her?" I asked. "Was that when the *wittigo* swooped out of the sky and carried her off to tear her into pieces and eat her for what she'd done?"

She uttered a broken laugh, but did not answer. Instead, she took my face in her cool palms and kissed my mouth. "Warm me, Jean-Baptiste," she pleaded "Take me in your strong arms and make me warm again, if only for one night "

"I will, I will," I promised, "but tell me first about the *wittigo*. Was it tall as a house? Was it made of ice and wind? Did it fly?" I kissed her pale cheeks and warmed her tongue with mine, coaxed answers from her with kisses.

"The *wittigo*," she said softly, "looks like you or me. It keeps its human form, but as it changes from man to beast, it grows new teeth, sharp and terrible, and eyes that open in a way to pierce the darkest night My people say it was the night and the cold and the terrible famine that made the *wittigo*. Her guilt ate away at her until there was nothing left but her never-ending hunger "

I stopped kissing the small well in her smooth belly, raising my head in question "The wife?" I said "The wife became the demon?" All at once the things she had been saying became clear to me *The wittigo looks like you or me Few see it in its true form and live to speak of it later*

"The famine went on for many years," she said, bending over me so she could nip gently at my throat, down my shoulder, "and because of what she had done, the woman tried very, very hard to keep the terrible hunger from overcoming her. She refused to kill any living creature for food. even though she was always hungry, and always so very cold She ate moss and rotting wood, mushrooms, and grew thinner and thinner until she could walk through the forest unseen, little more than the wind She desperately craved the company of her people, but whenever she tried to go near the village, the heat from their bodies made her weak with hunger The sun was the same, melting away her strength and resolve. The more she tried to stay away, the more she yearned for her people

"Until one day, she realized she no longer hungered for their company, but for their warm, living flesh She thought often of the tender meat that had clung to the bones in the soup, remembering how nourishing it had been, how strong it had made her feel If only she could have just a little of that soup now, when she was so desperately hungry, it would ease her pain She began to dream of tearing into a person with her teeth, devouring them One night, a man was lost in the woods .

She swallowed, her throat moving against my lips. "She followed him for a long time, whispering to him, leading him further and further astray, growing more and more ravenous He ran in terror like

Continued on page 86

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By Eric Baker

The Movies attempts to give players a little slice of Hollywood.

It is tempting to think of ***The Movies***, for the PC by Lionhead Studios and from Activison, as a two-part product: a game and movie-making tool. The problem with approaching *The Movies* this way is that while it is possible to play the game without ever using the advanced tools to create custom CGI films, it is impossible to create the films without playing the game. The game not only gives players access to the movie-making tools, but the quality of studio the player has built in the game controls what can be in the custom movies, the props, the sets, the actors, the extras, and the directors all depend on the state of the player's studio. In short, no matter how creative, trained, or dedicated a filmmaker players are, if they don't first lay the groundwork in the game part of the *The Movies*, they won't have what they want in the movie making-mode.

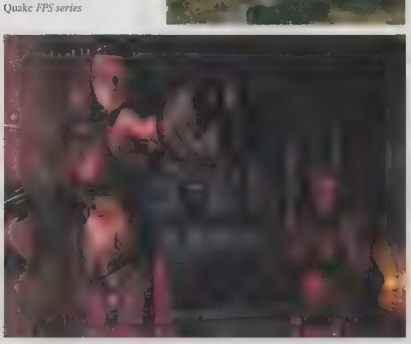
The game or Studio part of *The Movies* comes in two flavors. There is the Tycoon mode where the player starts in 1920 with a lot and some capital. In the manner of all simulation games (from *SimCity* on down), the player then tries to slowly but surely build the best, richest, most acclaimed movie studio in the world. The player does this by constructing support buildings such as production houses and acting schools, as well as sets for movies, trailers for the stars, and ornaments for the sheer class they give the place. *The Movies* is the sort of game where the player will be trying to keep stars drunk enough to be happy but not so drunk that they need rehab while at the same time making sure that there are enough bathrooms for hygiene without there being so many that the look of the lot suffers. Those are just two of the many, many elements that the player has to balance as the game's time marches steadily on.

RIGHT AND ABOVE: The Movies, from Lionhead Studios, offers two unique modes of play. BELOW: Quake 4 is the latest installment of the acclaimed Quake FPS series.

The alternative to the Studio mode is the Sandbox mode. Here, players can choose their starting year and their starting money. They can turn off things like "Star misbehavior" and turn on things like "movies shoot instantly" to dramatically reduce the amount of micromanagement required to keep the studio running and to make movies. What is important here, however, is that while the studio is much easier to run in the Sandbox mode than in Tycoon, players still have to earn certificates and develop the studio. Playing in Sandbox mode doesn't give players an unlimited number of actors to use in their custom films, for example.

One way or another, however, most players will eventually reach the point where they can start making the custom movies that may well have drawn them to purchase the game in the first place. Movies are created in two different editors. In Advanced Script Building, players pick the sort of movie they will make, and then construct it scene by scene. For each scene, players pick a set and then choose from among the prerendered animations available to it. When fully unlocked, there are 45 sets and 6,000+ animations available with which to build the visuals of the movie.

Once the basic movie is laid down, the player returns to the game and drags the movie's icon to the Post Production building. With this tool, the player can cut and rearrange the scenes as well as add music, sound effects, subtitles, and



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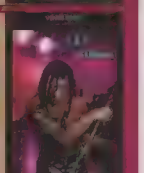

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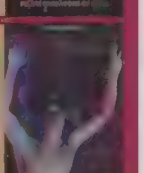

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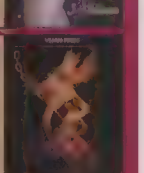
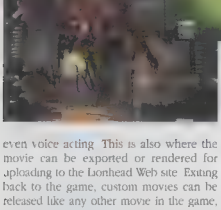




even voice acting. This is also where the movie can be exported or rendered for uploading to the Lionhead Web site. Exiting back to the game, custom movies can be released like any other movie in the game, earning money and prestige, although custom movies don't seem to do noticeably better in the game's world than the generic ones the game makes for players.

Overall *The Movies* is a good simulation. It's greatest flaw is that tasks cannot be assigned to the game's AIs while the game is paused. Time is always against the players, although with keyboard shotcuts, tasks can be assigned fairly rapidly. Its best part is managing the actors, the paper doll aspect of managing their dress and lives is a lot of fun. For players most interested in creating custom movies, the greatest flaw in the game is that props placed in one scene have to be placed again in the next scene, even if that scene takes place on the same set. The best part of the movie-making tools is how easy and fast it is to create a basic, watchable CGI movie.

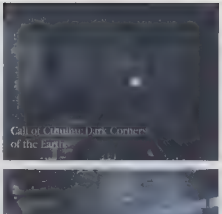
Despite its number, ***Quake 4***, for the PC and Xbox 360 by Raven Software from Activision, is actually the sequel to *Quake 2*, at least in terms of its single-player storyline. *Q2* saw the nameless marine battle his way across the Strogg planet and kill their leader. *Q3* lacked a single-player mode, it was an Internet death-matching game in the style of *Unreal Tournament*. *Q4* returns to the single-player mode and finds the player taking the role of space marine Matthew Kane of Rhino Squad. Kane is back on the Strogg planet and finding the aliens not as subdued as expected. With the occasional help of his squad mates and other human marines, Kane sets out to finish the Strogg once and for all.

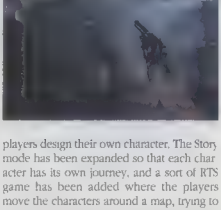
Quake 4 uses the same game engine as the recent *Doom 3*, so its graphics are state-of-the-art, but not an improvement over that game. For players, particularly those who don't have high-end systems, the good news is that *Q4* isn't as dark and claustrophobic as *D3*. It has more outdoor levels, more light in its indoor levels, and includes two vehicle levels. Best of all, the trusty machine gun, which is Kane's primary weapon for lots of the game, has a flashlight fitted to it, so there is no need to trade between light and killing as there was in *D3*. On the other hand, *Q4* is actually harder than *D3*. Even on the easiest setting, the enemies take more damage and are more accurate with their own fire than is typical in this genre of game. Of course, this works in the players' favor on the levels when they have help since the other squad members are more deadly than 'bots usually are.

A completely different first-person gaming experience is available in ***Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth***, for the Xbox by Headfirst Productions from Bethesda Softworks. For one thing, *CoC DCE* doesn't have an HUD. The players see the game out of the eyes of private detective Jack Walters. If Jack has a weapon ready, they see it in his hand, if it has a clip, there is nothing to tell them how many bullets are left. When Jack is injured, the edges of the screen get fuzzy, and when Jack is drugged or having a psychotic episode or an out-of-body experience, then the screen will shake or wobble as appropriate. Jack is a very human, very flawed protagonist and the visuals of the game reinforce this.

Set in the early 20th century, around the the end of World War I, *CoC DCE* starts in an asylum, then flashes back six years for a prelude, then returns to a time two weeks before the asylum scene and plays forward from there with Jack trying to solve a missing person case in H.P. Lovecraft's famous town of Innsmouth. In some ways, the game is probably better if the player has never read any Lovecraft and so has no idea what is coming, but *CoC DCE* is still a game that Lovecraft fans can love. They get fewer surprises from the background, but the creepy and tension-filled game-play will work just as well for them. This is a game of exploration and mystery; there are far more dialog trees and clues to read than there are monsters to fight, but when it does come, the fighting is very satisfying, partially because it is so long in coming and partially because the period weapons feel "right" in their graphics and effects.

Speaking of weapons, ***Soul Calibur III***, for the PS2 from Namco, is a 3D fighting game that is all about them. Not as pretty as *Dead or Alive*, not as complicated as *Tekken* and not as bloody as *Mortal Combat*, *SCIII* is just as slick and fun a fighting game as its predecessors. Three new characters with three new weapons have been added in this version, bringing the number of possible opponents, once they are all unlocked, up to over 25. In addition, there is now a mode that lets

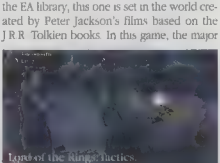




players design their own character. The Story mode has been expanded so that each character has its own journey, and a sort of RTS game has been added where the players move the characters around a map, trying to set up various matches. Nearly all the modes let the players earn gold that can then be used to buy different weapons and outfits for the characters.

As much as any other genre, fighting games have a real problem with diminishing returns. From its first installment, the *Soul Calibur* games have had an excellent control scheme and good animations. So good are these elements that they are basically unchanged. Players who have mastered previous versions of the game will have a very, very small learning curve for this installment; just some new moves to master and some new characters to explore. An on-line mode would have been a really welcome addition to the game so that players could greatly expand their possible opponents, but there isn't one. *SC3* is an excellent game; players who want 3D fighting with weapons can't do better. It simply isn't any sort of quantum jump over previous versions of the game.

There is no review of a Japanese RPG in this issue column, but consider ***Lord of the Rings: Tactics***, which is a Japanese-style, turn-based RPG for the PSP by Amaze from EA games. As with the other *LotR* games in the EA library, this one is set in the world created by Peter Jackson's films based on the J.R.R. Tolkien books. In this game, the major



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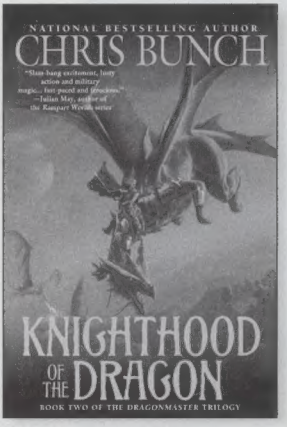
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battles of the movies are recreated, on a much smaller scale, in a turn-based combat system. What this means in practice is that players choose to be either the forces of good or evil, then command various heroes from the movies, with some lesser soldiers to support them, in a series of missions. Combat is done in rounds: players choose where their forces will move, and then the computer resolves the players' moves and its own at the same time. Next players decide which of their characters is going to attack who and how, and then the computer resolves those attacks and its own simultaneously. Once all that is resolved, there is another movement round and so on.

While the graphics and subject matter of *LotR:T* are American, one Japanese element of this game is that simply beating each mission in turn and then moving on to the next quickly becomes a recipe for total annihilation. The rewards in experience and loot for completing a mission once simply aren't great enough for the player's characters to keep up with the power of the game's characters. To advance through the game with any ease, players are going to have to beat the missions more than once; there are no rewards for failure and there is no way to save in the middle of a mission. Of course, this does give the player an excuse to try different tactics and hero combinations in each mission.

An unexpected pleasure is a supplement/humor book for any paper and dice fantasy role-playing game. ***The Wurst of Grimtooth's Traps*** from White Wolf's Sword and Sorcery imprint publishes the best from Flying Buffalo's long-running series of *Grimtooth's Traps* books. The conceit of these books is that the troll Grimtooth and his kid sister, Grimtina, live in a dungeon that they call the Traps Bazaar. There they collect components and assemble dungeon traps, both for sale and for their own amusement. The books are supposedly their wares and plans for other traps they've heard of. The conceit gives the book what little narrative it requires, but the real pleasure of the book is reading about the traps themselves.

The book divides the traps into room traps, corridor traps, and door traps. It also contains a map and write-up of the Traps Bazaar and a full write-up with maps of the Dungeon of Doom, a large underground dungeon with 55 traps of its own that aren't in the front of the book or in the Bazaar. There is also an index at the back of the book to help GMs or readers find the trap they want by name or CR rating. In all, it is 220 pages of traps from the simplest, "pushing in the button releases the blade that cuts off the pushing digit" sort to the most complex: "If the first four methods of death don't wipe out the party, the next four will" sort. Not all of the traps are breathtakingly clever or evil, and many of them are far too cruel to actually inflict on a party of gamers, but like any good cookbook, *The Wurst* is worth it for the gems it contains. ❧

Heart of Ice

Continued from page 80

a frightened partridge, falling and tearing his hands and knees, cutting his face on branches.

"It was the smell of his blood that made her remember," Kemewan said, "and she could deny the truth no longer. She had not mistakenly killed her child in a dream. The boy had been sick, starving. What sense was there in letting her beloved husband die to give a helpless child one more week of life? Who would have fed the babe once she was gone? Does a farmer feel guilt or pain when slaughtering a cow to feed his family? She fell on the traveler and ripped him open like a fox does a hare. For the first time in what felt like centuries, she was warm and sated, her belly full."

She sighed, a winter wind in naked trees.

"But the hunger rose again, sharper than ever before. The cycle had begun. There was nothing left of the young wife, just hunger where once there was love, just ice where her heart had been. Only the hunger remains now, and the cold, and the need."

"She must be lonely," I said.

"For what?" she asked bitterly. "The warm ones can never understand her. They give sustenance, a little company, some pleasure, but soon they grow old and run out of warmth. Perhaps…" she said, her tongue lapping at the place where my blood beat fast beneath the skin of my throat, "…one part of the legend is true, that the *wittigo* has a heart of ice, cold and unfeeling, untouched by emotion. It must, to do the cruel things it does."

I curled over her and laid my head on her breast, wondering what it would be like to feel no regret or blame, no remorse, no responsibility. "Can she not feel love?" I asked and she answered after a moment, "Of a kind."

"And me? Could you love me?"

In answer, she showed me her true eyes, reflecting red like embers in a fire, and her white teeth sharp as knives. I confess I thought my heart would burst in my chest, it pounded so hard. I was sick with fear, and transfixed with passion.

"Shall I tear your flesh from your bones, devouring your meat and drinking your blood?" she said, her voice the growl of a beast. "Or should I give you my heart of ice, so that you might try to melt it and make me love you?"

She was the most beautiful and terrifying thing I had ever seen. I closed my eyes and opened my mouth, my arms, and gave her my own warm heart to do with as she would, tear it from my chest and sink her teeth into it still hot and beating, or hold it in her hands to draw a little human warmth.

There is a sound ice makes on a frozen lake as it heaves and groans, trying to choose between the stillness of winter or the quickening of spring. Though the weather outside was warm, the leaves green yet on the trees, I could hear that sound as Kemewan bent over me. ❧

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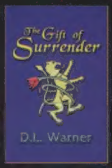

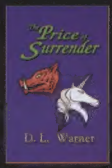

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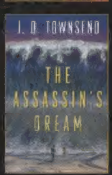

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